

THE WORST MAN IN THE WORLD



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EXCITEMENT !



NOVELS BY
SYDNEY HORLER

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STOUGHTON
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THE WORST MAN
IN THE WORLD

PAUL VIVANTI AGAIN

SYDNEY HORLER



HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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**To
MY FRIEND
WILLIAM LEES**

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FOREWORD

PREVIOUS adventures of Dr. Paul Vivanti in outlawry have been narrated in *Vivanti* and *The Mystery of No. 1.*

S. H.

THE multi-millionaire raised a shaking hand.

" You can cure me. I offer you any sum you care to name. Will you"—the cracked voice broke—" accept? "

" I should like to know definitely what is in your mind." The man to whom he had made this appeal spoke harshly.

Simon Haggerty, said to be one of the three wealthiest men in the world, craned forward.

" There's no mistake? You *are* Vivanti—Dr. Paul Vivanti? "

" I am Vivanti." The remarkable eyes of the visitor glowed.

" Wanted at the present time by the world's police, eh? " was the croaked rejoinder.

The other's face was suddenly transfigured. Evil it had looked before, but now it became devilish. Vivanti stepped forward; the hands, whose unnaturally long fingers fascinated Simon Haggerty, were out-thrust. Another second and they would have been twined around the

scraggy throat of the man to whom Death was already beckoning.

"Don't—be—a—fool! Keep away—damn you!" The shock had almost prostrated the man of millions, and he leaned back in the padded chair. His breath came in gasps.

Dr. Paul Vivanti, once the most celebrated nerve-specialist in Harley Street, lately the controller of a world-wide gang of criminals, but now a fugitive from the police, took a phial from his pocket and held it under the other's nose.

The effect was magical. The millionaire's lassitude instantly vanished. In some marvellous fashion strength flowed into that jaded frame. Haggerty sat up.

"What was in that phial? I'll give you any sum for the prescription!" he exclaimed.

Vivanti paid no heed to the question.

"What is it you want me to do?"

Simon Haggerty gave a reminder that he had been a controller of men.

"See that both doors are securely locked! I must make sure that what I say is heard only by you," he explained.

The order was obeyed.

"I am desperately ill," started the multi-millionaire. "To look at me you would say

that I was between eighty and ninety years of age. The truth is that I am only fifty-six."

He stared at Vivanti as though expecting some comment, but none was uttered.

"At fifty-six years of age I find myself one of the richest men in the world—I own banks, railroads, tobacco factories, steel mills. At the present time, men in every part of the world are working to make me more money. There is no single man living who wields more power than I do—and I am dying! How long do you give me?"

The answer came decisively.

"Not more than another six months. To be frank, you are practically dead now!" No mercy was shown.

"And yet my brain is as keen as ever. It is only this miserable body. . . ." Haggerty gave his visitor a searching glance beneath shaggy brows. His thin, haggard, lined face was flushed.

"'Life can be prolonged'! That has been the cry for some time!" he said feverishly. "Is there any truth in it, or are these sensational statements merely the result of newspaper writers' imaginations? Tell me!"

"I take it," was the answer, "that you refer to the new science of organotherapy?

It is, of course, the latest development of medical science, and has produced wonderful results. It may interest you to know that I was one of the pioneers of this new treatment. I worked with Meyerbach in Vienna many years ago."

"Did you operate?" Simon Haggerty had worked himself up into a state of tremendous excitement.

"I have performed every possible operation connected with organotherapy," was the level reply.

The words galvanised the decrepit man.

"Then my information was correct. I paid a man £1,000 to find you out and bring you here, Vivanti. No, he is not connected with the law, and you have nothing to fear. This man—his name does not matter—told me that you were hunted by the police of the world, and that you were without money. Is that correct?"

"Well?" snapped the other.

"If you agree to my proposal, I can put a fortune in your hands straightaway—a fortune! You can give satisfaction to every desire, possess anything you fancy! Is it not worth taking a risk?"

"I am used to taking risks." And, indeed,

he was. With a price on his head in every civilised country of the world, Paul Vivanti was still at large, although some months had elapsed since his last tremendous *coup* had been defeated on the very brink of success.

"That's what I hoped and expected you to say! Now, I want you to realise that, from the layman's point of view, I understand this subject thoroughly. I have read every book, every newspaper article, that has appeared. I have read, for instance, that facial ugliness can be cured by gland treatment. But my case is desperate—I am dying, as you have told me, and I want to live! God! how I want to live! If I were poor, struggling, it would not matter, but I wield more power over the industrial markets of the world at this moment than any living person. I simply cannot die! I mustn't die! I want at least twenty more years of life; you can name your own price, Vivanti, for giving it to me!"

The eyes of the man sitting opposite became pools of flame. Haggerty could feel them drilling into his soul.

"I know what you are thinking, Vivanti," the multi-millionaire said, sniffing eagerly the phial which the most dangerous criminal in Europe held again to his nose. "You are

thinking that my case is so bad that nothing but——”

“ Only a vital gland taken from a strong, perfectly healthy, and remarkably robust young man would give you those twenty years of extra life,” completed Paul Vivanti. “ It would be dangerous.”

“ Dangerous ? ”

“ The unfortunate young man would die.”

“ I offer you any sum you care to name, Vivanti ! What is the life of an obscure youth compared with the death of a man like myself ? ”

Paul Vivanti rose and paced the room. He was oblivious to Simon Haggerty’s presence. Money he must have, but, while the risk was undoubtedly great, he could obtain such a hold upon this possessor of millions that once again he would be able to make a bid for the world supremacy in crime which was his ceaseless obsession. Twice he had been thwarted, but this time——

“ I accept your terms, Mr. Haggerty,” he said.

In a handsome panelled room in the Albany, W.I., a young man sat at breakfast. It was a late meal. Peter Repington had been dancing at the Embassy Club until four o’clock

that morning, and, a believer in the sound old axiom that bed, like tobacco, was one of those things made to be abused, he had strolled negligently into the dining-room of his well-appointed flat at eleven of the clock.

A manservant uncovered a silver dish.

"The kidneys may be a little scorched, sir," he said, in a tone of apology, "but I called you nearly an hour ago."

Repington, a remarkably good-looking young man, whose slight effeminacy of appearance was a surprising foil to his real character, smiled.

"I felt unequal to any strain this morning, Dommett. I intend to make a real lazy day of it. Nothing to do and plenty of time to do it in—that's the Bright Thought this a.m."

Dommett poured the coffee, arranged the pile of newspapers—Repington was a great reader of newspapers, which, he declared, were vastly more interesting than any novels—drew attention to the morning's mail, and departed, heavy-footed but efficient.

There was nothing particularly interesting in the letters, and very little that was even mildly exciting in the newspapers.

"Golf at Coombe Hill is indicated, I think," Repington told himself, and rang the bell.

Dommett appeared, carrying a brass tray.

"Lady to see you, sir," he said, adding, "young, very pretty, fairly well dressed."

Pausing in the act of lighting a cigarette, Repington took the card and glanced at the name :

ELSIE SUMMERS

inscribed on the piece of pasteboard, beneath which, he noticed, was an address off the Edgware Road. But the card had something else ; in pencilled writing were the words : "I *must* see you ! "

It was an unusual experience, but Peter Repington was somewhat used to unusual experiences.

"Shown the lady in ?" he drawled.

"I took that liberty, sir" ; Dommett had a weakness for a pretty face.

"Very well, I'll see her."

A minute later, Repington was shaking hands with a girl whose thoroughbred appearance could not be disguised by her somewhat shabby clothes. She was—as Dommett had stated—very pretty, but her good looks had character as well as charm.

"You are Mr. Repington ?" The voice was cultured, but anxious. "Mr. Peter Repington?"

Repington bowed.

"I have a friend who works in the National Security Department," the visitor hastened to explain. "She has told me about you—and the things you have done."

"Sir Herbert Mandeville, the Secretary of the National Security Department, is my uncle," put in Repington; "it is true that sometimes he has asked me to potter round a bit."

"You have been wonderful! Margery Kent has told me." She paused. "Mr. Repington, I felt bound to come to see you this morning. The police have failed—" She stopped, brown eyes brimming. Repington, even more than the ordinary man, hated to see a girl in tears; and, moreover, he had already formed the correct impression that this girl would not cry without due cause, especially in front of a stranger.

"Please tell me," he said, with the charm which so many women had found attractive.

"It's about my brother, Hubert Summers."

Repington held up a hand.

"Do you mean the Hubert Summers who was such a promising young football player and whose—?"

Elsie Summers shivered.

"Whose body was found at the bottom of

the Clifton rocks," she replied with an obvious effort. "Yes—but my brother did not commit suicide. He was murdered!" she went on, in a rising tone of horror.

Repington touched the bell.

"Bring me the 'S' cabinet, Dommett."

A few minutes later:

"Correct me if I am wrong, Miss Summers, but I want to read out to you some particulars. I keep track of everything which may possibly interest my uncle's department," he went on. "I must confess that in the present case, however, I filed the details by mistake. It seemed an accident."

"It was not an accident, Mr. Repington. In spite of the police, and the reports in the newspapers, I am convinced that my brother was murdered. I will tell you why."

"In a minute, Miss Summers." Any ordinary acquaintance of Peter Repington would have been astonished at the change which had taken place in him. From a lazy-mannered *dilettante* he had become a keen-voiced man of affairs, concentrating on a problem.

"Let me read out what I have here, Miss Summers"—tapping the file. "Your brother, Hubert, was twenty-two years of age. He held a post with a well-known firm of auctioneers

in the city of Bristol, and was an exceptionally brilliant Association football player. His play had attracted considerable notice, and he had been invited to take part in trial games as an amateur by both the Bristol professional football clubs. Both of these offers he had declined.

"Your brother was in the best of health, and, so far as could be ascertained, he had no private worries. At twenty-two, especially if one is a good sports player, one doesn't have many worries, of course.

"To continue. Everyone who knew your brother was not only horrified, but startled—forgive me if I cause you distress——"

"Please go on," said the visitor with resolution.

"I was saying that everyone who knew your brother was not only horrified, but startled, to read one morning that his dead body had been found lying at the bottom of the Clifton rocks, directly beneath the famous Sea Walls and at a spot which had become unpleasantly associated with acts of suicide during the past twenty years."

The visitor's lips trembled. But her voice was even as she said :

"Your facts are correct, Mr. Repington. No one could understand the mystery, but it

was generally assumed either that Hubert must have thrown himself over the cliffs—and this, as I have told you already, I absolutely refuse to credit—or that he met with an accident. The police have pointed out that the suicide theory is the most likely, because there is a strong protecting barrier at the top of the cliffs. My own belief, which grows stronger every day, is that my brother was killed—*murdered!*”

Repington looked serious. Who could want to murder a popular youngster like Hubert Summers? And yet, as the girl had said, the suicide theory, which the baffled police had been only too thankful to advance, perhaps, was unlikely. It had struck him so at the time, but, being busy with other affairs just then, and this not coming under the category of cases which, as an unpaid free lance of Home Secret Service work, he handled for the National Security Department, he had dismissed the matter.

“Have you any real evidence, apart from your unshaken belief that your brother did not take his life?” he enquired.

“Nothing that you would call tangible. But, shortly before his death, Hubert wrote saying that he had met a man who had promised

him an introduction to one of the selectors of the Amateur International Selection Committee."

"I play Rugger myself, Miss Summers"—as a matter of fact, Peter Repington was a more than useful scrum half for the Harlequins—"but I take it that this gentleman was supposed to be interested in your brother gaining his amateur cap?"

"Yes. My brother was very keen on football, and the ambition of his life was to play for England as an amateur. He was supposed to be a very good centre-forward."

"Did he meet this man?"

"I do not know. All my brother told me in the last letter I had from him was that, after playing in a match on the Durdham Downs one Saturday afternoon, he was approached by a stranger—'a rum-looking cove, all head and eyes,' was the description he gave me of this person—who stated that he had been greatly attracted by my brother's play in that match, and that he would like to introduce him to a friend of his who was staying with him at that time and who was a member of the Amateur International Selection Committee."

"And you don't know, you say, whether your brother actually met this second man?"

" No."

" You have told the police this ? "

" Yes—but they seemed to disregard it, to pay no particular attention to it."

" It isn't very much to go on," confessed Repington. " Of course, it could be ascertained whether any member of the Amateur International Selection Committee did happen to be in Clifton that day. I'll make these enquiries straightforwardly and let you know the result."

The girl held out a hand.

" Mr. Repington, you have been exceedingly kind to allow me, a perfect stranger, to worry you in this way."

Repington responded instantly.

" Not at all, Miss Summers. If I can be of any help——"

With an impulsive movement she put her hand on his arm.

" If I could only thank you sufficiently——" she started, when Repington, slightly confused, cut in :

" Why not leave that until I have actually done something, Miss Summers ? "

Bristol, especially if you pay it a visit on one of its many wet days, is not the most beautiful

city in England. On the contrary, the first impression upon leaving the somewhat inadequate railway station, and emerging into Victoria Street, is frankly desolating.

"What a dreadful place!" remarked Elsie Summers.

"Many a jewel has an inartistic setting," replied Peter Repington reassuringly. "Remember that Clifton is a suburb of Bristol, and that Clifton is famous for its beauty."

A taxi-cab whirled them away from their depressing surroundings and set them down at the Emperor Hotel, which borders the glorious Clifton Downs.

"If you stay here and make yourself comfortable with tea and things, I'll hustle round and make a few enquiries," said Repington.

"Wouldn't you like me to come with you?"

"It would only distress you—and I'll promise to do all I can." A look at the keen eyes of the speaker satisfied Elsie Summers, who stated that she would stay in the hotel.

Taking another taxi-cab, Repington paid a number of visits. He called at the rooms which Hubert Summers had occupied, went on to the police—whom he found very intelligent, but strongly opposed to any other view but that the death of the promising local footballer

was anything outside an ordinary suicide case—and thence to the house of the secretary of the football team for which Summers had played.

Repington was ten minutes late for dinner, and shook his head in answer to Elsie's eager look.

"No; so far I haven't been able to gain any foundation for your belief," he said.

"You agree with me now, then?"

Her companion nodded.

"There is such a thing as intuition," he replied. "Some women possess it in a marked degree—and I have already proved that you come under that class. For instance, do you remember saying to me in the train that you had a feeling you would find something awaiting you at Bristol?"

The girl nodded.

"And now you tell me you have received a letter, by to-night's post, forwarded from London, that you didn't in the least expect."

"If it wasn't for the feeling I have about Hubert, I should be the happiest individual in the world at this moment," said Elsie Summers. "This letter"—holding up an envelope—"tells me that an uncle of mine, who died in New York a month ago, has left me 35,000 dollars."

"Congratulations!"

Her eyes shone.

"Thank you. You can scarcely realise what a difference this will make. It will mean that I shall be independent, that the horrible fear of never getting another job will be dispelled for ever!"

"Splendid! Life's somewhat curious. Up to a short time ago I had as much money as was good for me, but nothing very much to occupy my mind. The consequence was, I was rapidly deteriorating."

"I don't believe it!" was the quick answer.
"You should hear Margery Kent talk about you! I don't think too much flattery is good for any man, but Margery considers you a modern Scarlet Pimpernel and Sherlock Holmes rolled into one!"

Peter Repington coughed.

"Miss Kent must possess a florid imagination. I shouldn't advise you to pay any attention to what she says, Miss Summers."

The girl, who looked so charming in her simple dinner-frock, flushed.

"Oh, I didn't!" she replied. "Margery is incurably romantic; but, all the same, I am glad I brought my trouble to you."

"I am very glad you did, Miss Summers,"

Repington said, keeping his voice level. " If your brother was murdered, I intend to discover who killed him ! "

" Nothing much ever happens here, I suppose ? " asked Repington, signalling for the Young Person Behind the Bar to carry on her good work. His companion, a solemn, preternaturally portentous man of middle age, who had proffered the information that he was a journalist, lifted his glass, considered the question in all its bearings for a moment or so, drank slowly, and then replied : " We get a suicide occasionally ! "

" Young Summers, the footballer, for instance," said Repington. " What was at the back of that affair ? "

Clarkson, the journalist, looked at his interrogator.

" Are you down from London ? " he asked.

" Yes," replied Repington.

" What paper ? "

" *The Morning Moon*," answered Repington promptly. It was a white lie ; his friend, David Loring, was news editor of the very enterprising journal he had named, and was always willing to print anything in the sensational line which Peter cared to send along.

Clarkson assumed an expression of even deeper gravity. It was difficult to believe that a man could get such solemnity into his face.

"We don't go in for sensations down here, but, if you really want a good story for the *Moon*, I can put you on to one," he said.

"You can? That's awfully decent of you." Peter decided that, now he had committed himself, he must sustain the *rôle* of a hungry hunter of news.

The other dropped his voice.

"You've heard of Simon Haggerty, the multi-millionaire?"

"Of course. Said to be one of the richest men in the world, isn't he?" Repington did not add that the various activities of Simon Haggerty, to his knowledge, had given Sir Herbert Mandeville, the Secretary of the National Security Department, considerable cause for thought.

Clarkson drained his glass.

"Haggerty came here about two months ago in a dying condition. In a dying condition, remember! I know, because I was sent up to interview him. I didn't see him because the four specialists—two from London—who were in attendance wouldn't allow anyone to go into the room. But I happened to know

one of the servants, and he told me that the 'old man'—as he called Haggerty—couldn't last much longer. The *Courier*—that's my rag—wanted to print it, but were advised not to do so. Haggerty being here was supposed to be a close secret. If it had been generally known that the richest man in England was dying, the industrial market would have tumbled all to pieces."

Repington nodded.

"I see."

"Now here's the astonishing thing: to-day, Simon Haggerty rides horseback on the downs every morning, is obviously in perfect physical health—and doesn't look a day older than forty years of age! How has he done it?"

"Good doctoring, I should say."

Clarkson turned to go.

"Well, there's your story—if you care to go for it. Our people are afraid to print a line—I've put 'em on to it, but Simon Haggerty is a man of millions, and he might be offended."

Repington touched his arm.

"Just a minute. Where does this Haggerty man live?"

"In a house called 'Severncrest,' on the other side of the downs. It's just in front of the football pitch."

"Thanks." Repington said the perfunctory word of thanks thoughtfully.

Retiring to a quieter corner of the hotel bar, he filled his pipe. Three days had passed, and he had not learned anything which could elucidate in any way the mystery of Hubert Summers's death. Even this fellow Clarkson, who, as a newspaper man, might have been expected to know a good deal of the secret history of the place, had not talked about it ; like the rest of the locals, he accepted the affair, apparently, as one of the many cases of suicide which had occurred from time to time at that dread spot, the Sea Walls.

Repington had examined the scene of the tragedy, had looked up to the dizzy height from which the unfortunate youth had fallen, and could well understand why the body was terribly injured.

"It's just in front of the football pitch."

Repington allowed his pipe to get cold. He realised now why the matter-of-fact words of the newspaper man had subconsciously thrilled him. And yet what connection could there possibly be between a rejuvenated multi-millionaire and the death of Hubert Summers ?

"It's just in front of the football pitch." The

words persisted ; they remained, and would not be shaken clear.

The March night wind came screeching up the Avon Gorge as Repington turned into the gravelled carriage-way of "Severncrest."

That afternoon, after the conversation with Clarkson, the newspaper man, he had strolled across the downs, admiring the wonderful view as he walked. By the sheerest good luck he happened to have one of David Loring's cards in his pocket-book, and, arrived at the large house with "Severncrest" painted on the two pillars supporting the iron gates, he had handed this to the butler.

After a couple of minutes he had been shown into a large room on the ground floor, sumptuously furnished as a library.

A man of forty, who looked to possess intense virility, rose at once.

" You wish to see me ? I am Simon Haggerty." The tone was sharp, brisk, and businesslike.

Repington pondered. The Simon Haggerty whose photograph his uncle, Sir Herbert Mandeville, had shown him, was a man with a lined, haggard face and a bent and withered frame. This print, Sir Herbert had explained, was the

only known portrait of the multi-millionaire, whose dislike of press photographers bordered on the maniacal.

"I am delighted to see you looking so well, Mr. Haggerty," he said, wondering what miracle had changed an aged, decrepit man into this ruddy-faced individual who was obviously in the pink of condition.

"Yes, I am well!" boomed the other in a clear, ringing voice; "the fools of doctors could not do anything for me, and so I had to get my health back myself. I evolved a series of exercises—and look what they have done for me! I am good for another forty years of life—easily! But what is it you want to see me about, young man? Don't you know I am not very fond of newspaper interviewers?"

"Unfortunately I do, sir. But I have come down specially from London to see you. The *Moon* would very much appreciate your views on the current Russian question. Should we, or should we not, invite their trade?"

Simon Haggerty did not reply. Instead, he did a surprising thing, stepping forward and bringing his right hand down with crushing force on the caller's shoulder.

"I like the look of you," he declared; "you look strong and fit. Since I have regained my

health I have realised that strength and physical fitness are the greatest assets in life. I am busy now, but dine with me here to-night and I'll give you the best interview that any London newspaper has had for years. And we will talk about those exercises—you could start a little company, if you liked, using my name ; it would bring you in a fortune. You'll come ? ”

“ I shall be honoured, Mr. Haggerty.” It was the multi-millionaire's eyes which had made him wonder. Whilst Haggerty had been extending this totally unexpected invitation, they had blazed.

Remembering those eyes, Repington now touched the outside of the pocket which held his revolver. The outline of the weapon beneath the cloth was reassuring.

The butler he had seen in the afternoon answered the door, and he was ushered into a dining-room the furnishings of which reflected the wealth of its owner. Glancing at the laid table, the visitor saw that he was to dine with Haggerty *à deux*.

“ Delighted to see you again, Mr. Loring,” exclaimed the multi-millionaire, coming into the room with the buoyant step of a young man.

The dinner was excellent, and, after the

servants had cleared, Haggerty turned to his guest.

"To the success of the little company," he said.

Repington raised his glass. His host, it was obvious, had bought a copy of some standard work on physical culture and had palmed off the exercises contained therein as his own invention. Why?

Over his wineglass, from which he was drinking, Simon Haggerty's eyes shone curiously.

Repington, every instinct alarmed, put his glass on the table. Before he could get his hand to the pocket containing the revolver, someone from behind had flung a serviette, which reeked of chloroform, over his mouth and nose.

The drug did its work swiftly and mercilessly; before he could put up an effective struggle, he felt himself slipping into unconsciousness.

The last memory he retained before oblivion came was hearing Simon Haggerty's evil, chuckling laugh.

He was staring into the face of a human fiend. That was his first impression upon awakening from that forced sleep.

"All eyes and head!" Where was it he had heard that description? Who had used

it? Like an arrow stabbing his bewildered and numbed brain, came the recollection. Elsie Summers had used the words. It was the description her brother, Hubert Summers, had put in the last letter he had sent her. *He* had met a man who was "all head and eyes"—and Summers had subsequently died. . . .

"The sense of discomfort from which you are suffering at present will soon pass," said a voice, the tones of which made every nerve in Repington's body throb. Then, his vision more clear, he saw the speaker.

The man was a physical oddity. He had the frame of a schoolboy, crowned by an enormous head, bald in front and bulging in a great lump at the back. This was the head of a man with a monstrous brain: the head of a great genius—or of a great criminal.

The face was pale, with lips abnormally thick and vividly red. Above a narrow, sensitive nose were eyes that held secrets at which Repington felt himself shudder.

"Who the devil are you? And what do you think you are doing?" he demanded, when he realised his exact position—tied hand and foot to a narrow white table, and faced by a man whose expression filled him with a disturbing terror.

"I have a few minutes to spare, so I will satisfy your excusable curiosity, my young friend," was the answer in a mellow but taunting voice. "My name is Vivanti—Dr. Paul Vivanti."

A cold sweat of fear broke out over the prisoner's body. Intuitively he knew he had solved part of the mystery of Hubert Summers's death; the man standing there, with a smile upon his loathsome lips, had been that boy's murderer. But why?

By chance he had stumbled upon the trail of the most dangerous criminal at loose in Europe—probably the world. Paul Vivanti had a price on his head in every country where law and order were maintained. Sir Herbert Mandeville's Department six months before had smashed the gigantic world-conspiracy of crime of which Vivanti had been the leader.¹ All the lesser chiefs had been killed or arrested but this arch-fiend had escaped. The thrilling tale which his uncle had told him at the time now came back to Repington in every detail, and the memory served to intensify the horror of his position.

"I want you to understand that I regard the present circumstance as a most fortunate one," he heard Vivanti say. "You may have

¹ *The Mystery of No. 1.*

led a certain friend of mine, who shall be nameless, to believe that you were the news editor of the *Morning Moon*, but I am able to identify you as the nephew of Sir Herbert Mandeville. I am sure the latter, were he here, would agree that I have no reason to bear him, or any relation of his, any goodwill. As I intend very shortly to conduct a rather grave operation upon you, Mr. Repington, I think in fairness to myself that you should be acquainted with that fact."

Repington tugged at his bonds.

"Useless, I am afraid, my young man," came the mocking comment. "I have a servant, Li Hui, a Chinaman, who prides himself on what he can do with a rope."

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me what the joke is?" Repington succeeded in keeping his voice steady, but his nerves were twitching.

"It is a pity your uncle, Sir Herbert, is not here," replied Vivanti. "I feel sure he would appreciate the position. Have you heard of the gland treatment—that branch of modern medical science which can change an old man into a young one?

"The difficulty up till now has been that chimpanzees were difficult to procure. But

why bother with monkeys when all around there is a limitless supply of strong and healthy young men?" The speaker paused. "Of course, it is somewhat unpleasant for the young men upon whom I am obliged to operate, but I feel sure that any right-thinking person, like yourself, Mr. Repington, would not allow any such selfish reason to stand in the way of science being advanced in this remarkable fashion. . . . I can promise that you will know nothing whatever about it once the anæsthetic has done its work."

This man was either stark, raving mad or he was a monster of iniquity.

"It may interest you to know, my young friend, that the gland which very shortly I intend to take from your obviously very healthy and vigorous body will be disposed of to an aged French nobleman. M. le Comte de la Steyr is in urgent need of physical restoration, which is not surprising, perhaps, seeing that he is a notorious *roué*. I am expecting him at any moment, so that—excuse the haste—you will not have long to wait. I anticipate complete success—for M. le Comte. The last operation I performed not only ensured a dying man more years of active and strenuous life, but netted me a fortune.

"Perhaps," the voice continued, "you may wonder why, having obtained a fortune so easily—I say easily because the world has long recognised my genius as a surgeon; I worked with Meyerbach in Vienna—I should continue to use the knife. It is in the interests of science, my dear Repington!" He hissed the last few words, and, swinging his hand, struck the prisoner on the cheek.

"You receive that blow vicariously, as it were; I intend it for your worthy uncle Sir Herbert, who will be somewhat perturbed at your disappearance, I have no doubt. But, if you will pardon me, I'll fetch my case of instruments. I had a wire at tea stating that M. le Comte would arrive by the nine o'clock train from London. It is now 9.20; there is no time to lose."

Peter Repington sweated as he put every ounce of his strength into the endeavour to escape from his bonds. But he quickly realised that all effort was useless; without aid he was doomed.

M. le Comte de la Steyr? Degenerate as this French *roué* probably was, surely he would not allow a man to be murdered—butchered in cold blood!

A step outside and Vivanti returned. He

was now wearing an operating surgeon's smock, and carried in his hand an oblong black case.

"These are the little friends who will do all that is necessary." He smiled as he picked up a knife with a finely-tempered blade which glittered with a blue fire in the electric light. "I thought perhaps you might like to see the instrument of your lamented despatch to another world," he said ; "one touch with this on the brain—and you would be hopelessly insane. But, of course"—white teeth showing between pouting red lips—"I wouldn't be so unkind as that ! I have promised already that you shall feel no pain. I don't know if you are a religious man, my young friend, but, if you believe in that sort of thing, I can spare you a few seconds' grace. . . ."

He turned away as the sound of an electric bell pressed relentlessly pealed through the room.

"That, no doubt, is M. le Comte de la Steyr. I must go to greet him. I know you will excuse the delay."

Alone once more, Peter did pray. He prayed for just five minutes' release, with freedom for his hands. . . .

He heard a slight noise behind him. The sound gave him fresh uneasiness, because he could not turn his head.

" Oh, the fiend ! " sobbed a voice.

Repington experienced a breathless tumult of excitement. He recognised the voice. It was Elsie Summers ! But how——?

" Don't stay here ! It's a madman, a fiend . . . I warn you ! " he choked.

Then the door facing him opened, and Vivanti reappeared.

The man's face had changed. It had lost its former confident and mocking expression, and was now drawn and ghastly.

" It would not do to leave you like this," he said ; " but a few drops of this chemical after the knife and there will be no trace——"

He got no further. From behind him Peter Repington heard Elsie Summers speaking again. This time her voice was firm and confident.

" Hands up or I shall shoot ! "

Vivanti was obviously startled. The full lips drew back from the teeth in a snarl. He looked like a vicious beast brought to bay.

Swiftly pandemonium came. The room was plunged into darkness, a revolver shot rang out, something banged, and then, the lights having gone up again, Peter Repington found himself staring into the astonished faces of a couple of policemen.

" The man Vivanti ! " he gasped ; " he's a

murderer ! Grab him ! Don't let him get away ! ”

The constables departed heavily.

A girl started to sob.

Peter looked into Elsie Summers's eyes.

“ Intuition again ? ” he said.

“ Yes,” was the serious reply. “ After you had left the hotel, the feeling came to me that you were in danger. I watched outside ‘ Severn-crest,’ sitting on a seat hidden by a clump of trees on the other side of the road. Presently I saw what looked like a drunken man being led out. I guessed it was you—and, when they drove off in a motor-car, I followed on a bicycle. Then, after I had located the house, I had to find the policemen. Otherwise I should have been here before. I am sorry I am so late.”

“ Whose was the bicycle ? ” asked Repington.

“ It belongs to one of the waitresses at the hotel.”

“ What did you tell her when you borrowed it ? ”

“ That I wanted to get some exercise.”

Repington flung his head back and laughed almost hysterically. The thought of Elsie Summers, with a mackintosh flung over her charming evening frock, pedalling madly on a

bicycle that she had borrowed from a waitress, in order to save him from being murdered, struck him as being uproariously comic.

"It was a wonderfully plucky thing to do," he said, sobered. "You undoubtedly saved my life!"

"Take me away!" faltered Elsie Summers.

In his private room at the National Security Department, Sir Herbert Mandeville listened to the strange story his nephew told him.

"So Paul Vivanti is still in this country, and committing crimes of a characteristic revolting nature," replied the official. "Why did those fools of police let him get away?"

"He switched off the lights and then did a neat, disappearing trick through a trap-door. This communicated with an underground passage leading out to the cliffs. In the darkness——"

Sir Herbert nodded.

"Can I leave the matter to you, Peter?" he said a few moments later.

"To Miss Summers and myself, sir. Miss Summers has a very earnest wish to hand the murderer of her brother over to justice, while I—I'm with Elsie absolutely!"

The official twitched his eyebrows.

"Elsie?"

"She's a wonderful girl, sir," said Peter Repington, and departed whistling.

CHAPTER II

THE EVIL VINEYARD

M R. HORACE DAVIDSON of Washington, having stepped out of the Southampton boat-train at Waterloo, looked round. Immediately a tall young man, immaculately dressed in the Savile Row tradition, approached, smiling a welcome.

"Mr. Davidson?" he queried in a cultured voice, and, when the newly-arrived American Embassy attaché nodded, he added: "My name is Cleaver—Basil Cleaver; Sir Herbert Mandeville, of the National Security Department, has sent me to meet you."

Davidson stretched out his hand. He was a handsome, grave type, in the early thirties, whose blonde colouring suggested Norseman blood in previous generations.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Cleaver. I'll just see to my traps."

But the obliging Mr. Cleaver relieved him of this responsibility, explaining that his chauffeur would do all that was necessary. Within five

minutes, Davidson and the man who had come to meet him were seated in a luxuriously-appointed limousine, which left the busy station at a rapid pace.

"Your man is certainly some driver," commented Davidson, as, speeding out into the crowded Strand, a violent collision with another car was only avoided by a dexterous and sudden swerve.

"Yes, he is very reliable," was the indifferent response. Cleaver turned. "My instructions from Sir Herbert, Mr. Davidson," he said, "were to take you direct to him. He wishes you to dine with him to-night at his private residence. I trust that will be satisfactory to you?"

"Quite." Something unexpected must have cropped up, Davidson supposed. In any case, the prospect was not an unpleasing one; the hospitality of Sir Herbert Mandeville, the Secretary of Great Britain's National Security Department, had passed into a legend on the other side of the Atlantic. He wondered whether there would be any of that port about which Akers had raved.

"Sir Herbert's health has been none too good of late," went on the explanatory Mr. Cleaver; "that is why he has recently left

Clarges Square and taken a place at Hampstead, on the borders of the Heath."

"Hampstead Heath, eh?" commented Davidson. "Now that's very interesting! I've read a lot about Hampstead Heath back in the States, and one of the treats I promised myself whilst on the boat was to explore all around. Isn't there an inn, or something, where the highwaymen are supposed to have hidden?"

"Yes. 'The Spaniards.' I shall be delighted to take you there."

"That's kind of you. Hampstead Heath, eh? Well, I shall certainly enjoy going there."

The highly-polished and cultured Mr. Cleaver turned away to hide a smile. If the ambassadorial representative from Washington could have seen that smile, he would have been puzzled. But he was looking out of the window at the time, watching the drifting crowds in the Euston Road.

The heavy car increased its speed as quieter thoroughfares were reached. In a very quick space of time Davidson was regarding a great expanse of what looked like open country.

"There's the Heath, Mr. Davidson," said his companion.

The American looked in the direction of the pointing finger.

Instantly the cultured Mr. Cleaver performed a singular action. Whilst the attention of the other man was attracted, he withdrew from a pocket a pad that smelt strongly of almonds.

"And is that——?"

Horace Davidson did not complete the question. As he turned, the immaculately-dressed Mr. Cleaver hurled himself against him. The pad which he held in his left hand was pressed relentlessly against the attaché's nose and mouth.

The victim struggled desperately. Although the fumes of the anæsthetic were robbing him of strength, he hit out furiously with his right fist. Cleaver had seen the blow coming, and ducked, but this meant that his left hand slipped from Davidson's face.

"You—you—" choked the assaulted man. Then the car door opened.

"Finish him, Saunders!" ordered Basil Cleaver, whose Savile Row clothes had become slightly creased.

The chauffeur brought a black object down with sickening force upon the bare fair head.

The American attaché crumpled to the floor of the car, which shot quickly forward.

In the library of his uncle's house in Clarges Square, Peter Repington, the unofficial free

lance Secret Service agent, thoughtfully clipped a cigar.

" You say that the chap hasn't been seen since he left Southampton ? " he asked.

Sir Herbert Mandeville paused in his pacing of the room.

" Davidson has been kidnapped without a doubt," he replied irritably, " but where he is now no one has the slightest idea. What happened was this : With you out of Town, I sent young Cleaver down to Waterloo in the car to meet Davidson. What happened I don't know, but Cleaver at 8.30 last night was taken to Charing Cross Hospital suffering from some form of powerful narcotic poisoning. He was found helpless inside the car by Jones, the chauffeur, when he reached Waterloo. Jones at once called the police, and Cleaver, as I have told you, was taken to the nearest hospital, where he is at present."

" An ingenious scheme ; of course, there was some confusion and delay, I take it ? And, while this was going on, someone masquerading as Cleaver hopped on to the platform, made himself known to Davidson, and drove him away."

" No doubt you are right. But, although Scotland Yard and my own staff have been busy ever since last night, they haven't got hold of

a single clue that seems either reasonable or intelligent. I am frightfully worried, Peter ; I wish you had not been away. Twenty-four hours have been wasted, and God knows what may have happened in that time ! If anything has gone wrong with Davidson, I shall be held responsible. He comes here on behalf of the American Government to consult with me about a matter of outstanding importance—and he disappears ! ” Sir Herbert resumed his agitated walk up and down the room.

“ There’s no chance of his having gone off on a binge of some sort—or have followed some unknown charmer, I suppose, sir ? Some of these Americans are very susceptible birds, you know. You remember the case of that millionaire chap who disappeared after leaving his club in Pall Mall, and was found——”

“ No, no, no ! Nothing of that sort could possibly have happened to young Davidson,” replied Sir Herbert decisively. “ He realised the responsibility of his mission far too keenly to play the worst kind of fool. He had been sent on a very delicate international commission. No ; my belief, my conviction, is that someone has got at Davidson to do him an injury. At such a time as this, an occurrence of that sort may have far-reaching results.

There are men in this country who would give a great deal to spoil our present amicable relations with America."

"But no one could possibly hold you responsible, sir! Why, people mysteriously disappear in London practically every day."

"The fact that Davidson came to London at my express wish and invitation makes me responsible for his personal safety. I—"

Then the telephone rang, and the speaker went to the cabinet on which the instrument was resting.

"Yes, yes," Peter heard him say. "Yes, this is Mandeville speaking. No—not a word. Haven't you? . . . Yes, of course; directly I hear anything. We are doing everything possible, sir."

"That was the American Ambassador," he told Repington, replacing the receiver. "Look here, Peter, you will have to find Davidson for me! I shall be eternally grateful to you."

His nephew regarded the tip of his cigar.

"Anything to oblige, of course, sir—but isn't it rather a tall order? I mean, after the Yard and your own men have failed?"

The Secretary of the National Security Department took the chair on the opposite side of the log fire.

"I do not wish you to become conceited,

Peter, but I have a recollection that once before you justified the confidence I placed in you," he rejoined. "On that occasion, also, the police and my own department had hitherto failed. When Vivanti——"

Repington leaned forward so suddenly that the ash from his cigar spilled on the carpet.

"Vivanti!" he repeated, as though asking himself a question. "What sort of a fellow was Davidson, sir?" he asked. "Physically, I mean?"

"A giant of a man, I understand; there must have been more than one of the brutes or they would not have mastered him."

"If you don't mind, sir, I'll be getting along," said Repington, rising.

His uncle stared at him.

"Does that mean that you aren't interested?" he snapped.

"It means, sir, that I am very interested indeed. As a matter of fact, I intend to start trying to find your man Davidson. I'm not such a fool as to promise any results, however."

"Do what you can, Peter. . . . I'm frightfully worried."

Back in his comfortable Piccadilly flat, Peter Repington lit a pipe and tried to get a line on

the problem which appeared so baffling. From whatever angle he viewed the strange disappearance of the American, Davidson, his thoughts always came back to Dr. Paul Vivanti, that sinister figure of the underworld with whom he had started to wage so bitter a duel of wits.

Vivanti, the Worst Man in the World, as he had been truthfully, if somewhat melodramatically styled by that department of the British Secret Service to which Repington gave allegiance, was still at large—he had had bitter experience of the fact only a week or so back.

Another name flashed into his mind.

Elsie Summers ! The girl who had allied herself with him in the self-appointed task of tracking down Vivanti. She had promised to write—and hadn't. There had seemed a chance—a strong chance—of their becoming great pals after that visit to Clifton, in which she had saved him from an awful fate at the hands of this arch-fiend. But then she had disappeared and not a line had come. Where was she now ? Why hadn't she communicated with him ?

The telephone in the hall buzzed. His uncle worrying again ? He went outside and took the receiver off its hook.

“ Hello ! ” he said casually.

The next instant he started violently, for a

voice he remembered came to him faintly over the wire.

"Elsie!—Miss Summers!" he exclaimed. "I was just thinking about you! Where are you? Why haven't you written?"

The answer came:

"Listen! Send police. . . . 'The Vineyard' . . . big house, Hampstead . . . go into the garden . . ." And then a muffled cry—and silence.

"Hello! hello! hello!" called Repington frantically. But no reply was given. He replaced the receiver with an oath.

He looked round. Yes, he was in the hall of his flat. That had been Elsie Summers's voice speaking. What was it she had said? "Send police . . ."

Then she was in danger! To hell with the fellow Davidson! He had something better to do than to waste time over his disappearance; he had to go to the assistance of the girl who meant more to him than anyone else in the world!

Snatching up hat and coat, he took a revolver from a table drawer and rushed from the flat.

That Horace Davidson didn't smash his fist into the face of the man sitting opposite him

was due solely and entirely to the fact that he could not move.

When he first recovered consciousness he thought he must be dreaming. For the scene in which he appeared to be playing an inept and unwilling part was like something out of a crudely-sensational film. It could not be actually happening. Then the stout leather thongs securing his legs and arms, cutting into his flesh as he tugged at them, convinced him that this was reality.

"I shall be glad of an explanation." Horace Davidson, even in such a situation as this, was not one to waste words.

The person opposite him smiled. This man was a physical oddity. He had the frame of a schoolboy, crowned by an enormous head, bald in front and bulging in a great lump at the back. It was the head of a man with a gigantic brain, Davidson decided.

The face was pale, with lips abnormally thick and vividly red. Above a narrow, sensitive nose were eyes that, staring into his, made the imprisoned man mentally shudder. They seemed to Horace Davidson to be twin pools of evil.

"Perhaps I had better start by introducing myself, Mr. Davidson——"

"You know my name?"

"Obviously. I also know the reason of your visit to this country. I regret that it should have had such an unfortunate sequel."

Davidson tried to control his rising temper.

"We won't waste time over pleasantries which mean nothing," he said. "Tell me briefly what your object is—money?"

"I was about to introduce myself," returned the other; "my name is Vivanti—Paul Vivanti!" He waited for the other to make a comment, but Davidson remained silent. The name conveyed nothing to him.

"Money is at the back of most activities, my dear Mr. Davidson, and I cannot deny that it was with the object of making money that I —er—caused you to be placed in your present position, which I regret is somewhat uncomfortable."

"If you think you can hold me to ransom, you swine, you'd better have another idea, and quickly!" declared the prisoner. "The British Government know I am in this country. Sir Herbert Mandeville, the Secretary of the National Security Department——"

"A very old enemy of mine," interjected the other.

"—will be making all sorts of enquiries about that faker calling himself 'Cleaver.' "

"The real name of my agent sent to meet you at Waterloo Station is Williams; he is an admirable fellow. He appears to have fooled you completely. I regret that you will have no chance now to admire the beauties of our wonderful Hampstead Heath."

"What's your game?" demanded Davidson hoarsely. He was reluctant to admit it, but this strange individual terrified him. The man seemed scarcely human.

"I will tell you very briefly," said Vivanti. "You have come to London as the representative of the American Government on an extremely important mission. There is some talk of a treaty, I understand, between the two nations. . . . I see I interest you. . . . Well, you do not need to be told, I feel sure, how interested certain of the European Powers are in the news you bring from across the Atlantic. To satisfy your very natural curiosity I will go further and say that the representative of one of those interested Powers has offered me a sum of money—a very handsome sum of money—to learn from you the fullest details of the proposals you bring to the British Government."

Helpless as he was, Davidson laughed.

"You don't think you are going to get

anything out of me, you damned thug?" he asked. "Because, if you do, you're likely to be disappointed."

The abnormally red lips parted.

"No, I do not think I shall be disappointed," returned the man looking down at him. "You are perhaps not a scientific student. Had you, for instance, any interest in modern medical research, you might know that a certain drug which has just been placed at the disposal of skilled experimentalists like myself has quite remarkable powers. For instance, one injection in your arm, and everything which is stored away in your brain at the present time will be revealed to me. In Italy, the police surgeons have been using X2B, as this drug is called, for some time, in obtaining information from reluctant criminals. It sounds fantastic, I daresay, but let me assure you, my dear Mr. Davidson, that what I am saying is scientifically true."

Davidson kept silent. He was stunned beyond the means of speech. This was the most hellish, the most *bizarre*, the most incredible thing he had ever heard—and it was happening to him!

The mocking voice continued:

"Of course, your disappearance—for, after

you have given me the information I require, I am afraid it will be necessary for you to—er—disappear—will cause a certain distress to your relatives and to your friends—including, amongst others, Sir Herbert Mandeville—but you will have the satisfaction, at least, of knowing that you were not able to help yourself."

The speaker reached forward. . . .

Davidson was powerless to prevent him thrusting a hypodermic needle into his arm.

Peter Repington's sports two-seater shot up Hampstead's Heath Street at a speed rarely excelled even in that dangerous thoroughfare.

Would he be in time? The possibility that he might arrive too late sent him into a frenzy. The moan which he had heard over the wire meant that the girl had been caught telephoning. What had they done to her? What was Elsie Summers doing in the house? What would he find in the garden? He stepped on the accelerator as these questions raked him with fresh anxiety.

Tearing the thick gloves he wore on the sharp spikes that guarded the top of the high garden wall, Repington dropped softly to the other side. In the course of his work he had met

many strange terrors, but now he could feel his heart beating great hammer-strokes. It was the possible fate of the girl that unnerved him.

This garden, stretching out to the edge of the Heath, was large. How vast he could not tell, because he dared not use the flashlight which he had brought—at least, not yet.

Very cautiously he moved forward. As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he fancied he made out outlines—a huge lawn first, then what appeared to be a sunken garden ; in the distance beyond, a black mass that might be outhouses, old stables, now used for—what ?

Crossing the lawn, he sank to his hands and knees. He could not afford to run any risks. It was only when he reached the edge of the lawn that he noticed, coming from the bowels of the earth, a faint, thin pencil of light. Had he not been almost on top of it he could not have seen this light ; certainly it had not been visible before.

He put out sensitive fingers, feeling this way and that. Presently he touched what appeared to be a large iron or steel ring.

A trap-door ?

He tugged gently. Something beneath his

fingers moved. With infinite caution he raised the thing, and, looking down, saw a flight of steps. The light he was now able to see had glinted through a faint crack in the wooden trap-door.

In an upstairs room of the great house which was her prison, a remarkably pretty girl looked out through barred windows at the huge garden where she knew evil was being done. Had Repington recognised her voice? And had he come?

So intense was the gloom that, however hard she strained her eyes, she could not see anything. Bitterly she reproached herself. Why had she not taken Repington into her confidence before? It was too late to waste time in lamenting over that fact now. Too late! . . . Perhaps she had been the means of sending the man she loved to his doom—an awful doom, since Paul Vivanti, Peter Repington's terrible enemy, was in this house. . . .

She had acted for the best, she had thought, in working on her own in this affair. The risk was far too great for her to allow Peter Repington to share it.

But she had sworn to find and avenge the

murderer of her brother—find him and bring him to justice. Vivanti, she knew, was back in England, the country he hated, the nation he had sworn to humiliate.

But the way to find him? Threshing out this problem, she had come to a plan; if she could get into the household of Simon Haggerty, the millionaire ally of Paul Vivanti, the man who aided the criminal in his hellish schemes, she might gain some idea where Vivanti himself could be found.

It had taken time and endless patience. First, she had to find Haggerty's London residence. The millionaire had two, she discovered—one in Sloane Court and the other on Hampstead Heath, a huge, rambling place called "The Vineyard." The place, even in the day-time, seemed to have an eerie atmosphere surrounding it, and she decided that it would be here rather than in the Sloane Court house that she would be most likely to meet Vivanti, the Man of Evil.

The scarcity of servants helped her plans.

"There is a vacancy for a parlourmaid at the house called 'The Vineyard,'" she was informed at one of the Hampstead agencies.

Her heart leaping into her mouth, she presented herself at the mansion. Neatly dressed,

she made a pleasing appearance. The door was opened by a Chinaman, whose slit eyes filled her with fear.

She was invited inside, however, by the Oriental, who went to some trouble to try to place her at her ease. Speaking in cultured English, he told her that he was the butler, and that if she did her duties satisfactorily she would have a good place.

"No doubt you would like to see my references," she said. These had been provided for her by a couple of old friends of her dead mother's to whom she had been forced to tell some necessary lies.

"Yes—these are quite satisfactory," the Oriental butler had said, after reading. "When will it be convenient for you to come?"

"At once," she had replied.

Within two hours she was installed. Only after she had taken the place did she learn that Simon Haggerty was not in residence—that he was staying abroad, and that the house was let to an "invalid gentleman" who had come to this mansion on Hampstead Heath "for the benefit of his health." She did not like Baron Strepoff when she saw him. He ogled her in a manner which was humiliating; but his presence there told her that, if she wished

to achieve her object, she must stay in "The Vineyard."

Her predictions had been amply fulfilled. That man with the huge head, the horrible lips, and the dreadful eyes . . . it was Paul Vivanti.

That night, after hearing that muffled conversation which had turned her cold with terror, she realised she was powerless alone. What could she, a girl, do on her own ?

So she had telephoned to the man she trusted most in the world. But, while she was endeavouring to compress what she had to say into a few understandable sentences, she had been seized from behind ; the face of Li Hui, the Chinese butler, distorted with rage, had glared at her. She had been cruelly struck down. Oblivion came, and when she regained consciousness, she was a prisoner in that room with the barred windows.

Horace Davidson gasped. Coming back from that nothingness into which the drug had sent him, he experienced paralysing fear. How much had he told ? Had that devil really the power to learn his secrets ? God ! . . . And the future safety of the world had depended on him keeping silent. . . .

But could he ? Had he already said . . . ?

Perspiration beads broke out on his forehead ; he almost wished he could die.

He tried to rise, but both arms and legs were still bound.

A man was talking.

" Fortune has played into my hands, baron ; as you can see, he is entirely in my power. The drug has acted splendidly. He is now in a fit condition to answer—and answer truthfully —any question you may care to put to him.

Davidson turned his head. He saw the man, the first sight of whom had chilled his mind with terror, talking to another. The latter had a white, evil face, which was craned forward.

" First, then——" started this second man.

Bedlam followed the words. There was the sound of a revolver shot shattering the stillness. Then came sudden darkness. He could hear a figure pounding across the room. After that, forgetfulness ; his tortured nerves could stand no more. He swooned.

" Yes," confessed Peter Repington ruefully, as he and Sir Herbert Mandeville left the bedroom where Horace Davidson was now soundly sleeping, " Vivanti got away. I thought I should have a better chance of collaring him

in the darkness, and so I put the light out ; I was afraid to shoot straight at him, because he was bending over Davidson at the time. . . . There must have been a secret passage leading out of that underground den—but the police couldn't find it."

" How did the police get there ? "

" I met a constable on point duty at the top of Heath Street. Suddenly realising that the job might be more than I could tackle comfortably myself, I told him to get together a squad and follow me to 'The Vineyard.' In the meantime, I buzzed on."

" We have the others—including that Chinese butler."

Peter Repington forgot his usually impeccable manners sufficiently to scoff at his distinguished relative.

" They don't amount to a row of pins, sir ! It's Vivanti we want."

The car stopped at the Albany courtyard, and Repington got out.

" See you later, sir."

When he walked into his flat, a girl rose to greet him. The recent terrible experience through which she had passed had not robbed Elsie Summers of her gracious beauty.

" I have come to thank you—and explain," she

said ; " you have scarcely given me a chance before."

" That is true," he acknowledged gravely ; " if a man like Vivanti slips through your fingers when you think you have him safely hooked——"

" I quite understand that capturing Paul Vivanti is the dearest wish of your life, Mr. Repington," she answered quickly, the colour heightening in her cheeks.

" I did not say so," he told her ; " it is true that putting Vivanti behind bars would give me considerable satisfaction, but"—looking at her keenly—" I happen to have other ambitions."

" Let me tell you how I got into that house," she said, averting her eyes.

Peter Repington listened to her story.

At the end :

" On occasion I can be frightfully stern—in fact, almost a bully," he said. " This is one of the occasions. In future, Miss Summers, you do nothing on your own ; I forbid it. I want an assistant—someone to work with me and under my instructions. I herewith offer you the job. What do you say ? "

Elsie Summers made a *moue*.

" You are a very determined person—I suppose I shall have to say ' yes,' " she replied.

IN that scene of bewitching beauty—the sun was shining from a sky of cloudless blue, which meant that Monte Carlo at that moment was the most entrancing place in the world—Hector Turnbull felt an outcast and an alien. A man who had lost all his money at the tables, he had no longer any part in this town of pleasure.

He was sitting brooding despairingly upon a future which seemed perfectly hopeless when he overheard a few words from the man occupying the next umbrella-shaded table.

"One a day—that's the average, they say. Of course, when a poor devil has lost all he's got in the world, what is there to do in this place, where the very air costs you about a dollar a breath? This fellow must have thrown himself over the rocks—the body was terribly mutilated. Naturally, the papers have nothing to say—the Casino authorities do not believe in publicity of that sort."

"How terribly sad," murmured a girl's voice in reply. "Oh, don't let's talk about it any more, Gerald!"

"No—I ought not to have mentioned it at

all ; there's something better to talk about in Monte Carlo on a day like this. . . ."

Turnbull moodily lit his last cigarette. What in the devil's name did these Americans want to talk about death for—when his own thoughts were moving irresistibly in that direction ? A shiver went through him, not so much of fear—he was a thoroughly desperate man—but of resentment. Damn the fellow ! With millions, no doubt, standing to his credit, he could well afford to be a cheap philosopher.

With his hat pulled well down over his eyes, he surveyed the glittering scene. That it might be for the last time gave him a sense of ironic satisfaction. There would be no falling over the rocks for him, however ; that was a barbarous method. No, a slight pressure on the trigger of a revolver and—*exit*. Well, it would be a quick way.

It would be all over then. The curtain would be rung down on the sorry farce which represented his life. Ever since he had been hounded out of the British Diplomatic Service—it had been a diabolically clever plot which made him, an innocent man, the scapegoat for someone else's villainous treachery—he had been an outcast from his kind. The half-world of many great cities had seen him. He had

not been too particular—but how could a man ruined at the very threshold of what had promised to be a decent career afford to be particular?

Out of a somewhat dubious enterprise in Vienna, a sum equivalent to £1,000 in English money had passed to him. As he had gazed at the huge pile of notes, he remembered he could scarcely believe that the chance of which he had dreamed for so long had actually come!

That same night he had left for Monte Carlo. With a capital of £1,000, a man with decent luck might win enough at the tables to keep him comfortable for the rest of his life.

He had spent the best part of a week in the Casino—and now he had exactly ten shillings left! Not enough to pay for his day's bill at the *pension*.

One of the human butterflies who had come out to drink *apéritifs*, now that the sun was shining, smiled as she passed. She knew a way of chasing the heavy frown from the clean-shaven face of the handsome Englishman.

Turnbull would not have paid any heed even if he had noticed her—which he didn't. His attention was attracted by a man who came threading his way through the tables.

This man hesitated when he first saw Turnbull, and would have passed on, but, shrugging

his shoulders, stopped and took a seat at the same table.

"How are you, Turnbull?" he asked somewhat awkwardly. Basil Cleaver was in the National Security Department of Great Britain, and it would not do his reputation any good, he knew, to be seen talking in a public place with a man so discredited as Hector Turnbull. But he was a decent fellow—he hated to act the Pharisee.

The man he addressed turned on him with a sneer.

"I am considering suicide, Cleaver," he replied, with an abruptness which shocked the other; "I personally favour a revolver-bullet, but I shall be pleased to listen to any ideas you may have on the subject. I've just heard about a poor devil who threw himself over the cliffs, but that method seems to me to be too crude."

Basil Cleaver checked himself in time. The chief reason why he was in Monte Carlo was to investigate the death of a man whose terribly mutilated body had been found the previous morning. He would have liked to have discussed the matter with Turnbull—but then remembered that the mention of any official business must be strictly taboo between them.

"Don't be a fool, Turnbull," he said sharply ; "things can't be as bad as all that. Pull yourself together, man ! "

Turnbull threw away the stump of his cigarette.

"I'm not asking for your pity, Cleaver," he replied in a harsh, unnatural tone ; "if you gave me pity I should fling it back into your teeth. But in—in the old days I rather liked you ; that is why I propose to use up a few of the remaining minutes I have left in talking to you. But you may not care to listen ? "

"Have a drink—and talk away. Only cut out the rot."

Turnbull refused the drink—but talked.

"I was innocent in that filthy business, Cleaver. I don't ask you to believe it ; I don't ask you to make any comment—I would rather you didn't, as a matter of fact—but I was the scapegoat, the catspaw. Oh, I know no one would believe me, but it's God's truth—even although I shall never have any chance to prove it. Besides, after the next hour it won't matter—"

"Don't be a fool !" said his companion again. "You've got all your life in front of you. What are you now ? Only twenty-eight."

"Twenty-seven, to be exact. A week ago

I had, it is true, £1,000, but"—looking towards the Casino—"it has all gone with the exception of a few francs. No, my luck is dead out, Cleaver. Good-bye; I am glad to have seen you."

He rose, threw off the restraining arm, and walked away.

Neither Turnbull nor Basil Cleaver were aware that, as the former left the Café de Paris, a man rose stealthily from a seat in the corner and tracked the discredited Englishman.

Waiting till no one was in earshot, this man now approached Turnbull.

"Monsieur will excuse me," he said, "but I have something to say to you."

"I warn you that I am not in the mood for polite conversation," replied Turnbull. He eyed the man, who looked a tout of some sort, indifferently. Monte Carlo abounded with the type.

"What I have to say will interest monsieur, that I promise. Come, let us sit."

Without waiting for his companion to make any reply, the speaker led the way to a shaded seat. Scarcely knowing why he did so, Turnbull followed.

"I do not wish to be offensive, but I have

been watching monsieur for some time," said the stranger.

"The deuce you have! Why, may I ask?"

The other spread out his hands.

"Monte Carlo is one of the most wonderful places in the world," he said, "and I am a student of human nature. . . . I have been watching you, monsieur, because I think I can make you an offer which will appeal to you. Has all your money gone, monsieur?"

Turnbull flushed.

"Look here," he said angrily, "who the devil are you, and what's your game? What business is it of yours whether I have come down to my last franc or not? Your damned cheek!"

The stranger made a conciliatory gesture with his long, white fingers.

"I assure you I have no wish to be offensive—did I not tell monsieur at first? I only asked the question because I know that men who have lost their money are generally all the more eager to listen to such a proposal as I have to make to you, monsieur."

It seemed contemptuous to tell this foreigner—what was he, French or Italian?—that he had left the Café de Paris with the intention of taking his life.

"What is the proposal?" Turnbull asked.

"Even in Monte Carlo there is not a more dramatic situation than this," replied the stranger, speaking quickly; "let us hope, monsieur, that it will appeal to you. I am the secretary of le Baron de Printemps. He has been an astonishing gambler all his life. Many fortunes has he lost; others he has won. After years of study and research he has found a system—no, I pray you not to smile, monsieur; this is not one of those 'systems' which the novelists write about. It has been proved!"

"Then all the Baron has to do is to run along to the Casino and break the bank. I hope he does—they have just taken practically every franc I possessed."

"I come now to the difficulty," said the stranger, disregarding the other's levity. "My master, le Baron, is not permitted to enter the Casino. An indiscreet valet has talked of this system which has been proved to be infallible. The authorities, you understand, have a fear—what is it you English say?—they elevate the breeze, raise the wind? So it is that my master, le Baron, cannot play his system."

"Rubbish!" commented Turnbull. "You don't mean to say that the Casino management refuses a man of your employer's position

admittance just because he has invented a system? Why, there isn't a 'regular' at the tables who doesn't possess a 'system' of some sort! That doesn't cause the management any sleepless nights so far as I can tell. They smile upon the owners of the 'systems'—because they know from experience that they always fail!"

The other maintained his temper.

"All that you say, monsieur, is correct—except in the case of le Baron. I assure you on my word of honour that what I am telling you is true. Apart from the prejudice of the authorities, my master cannot put the system into operation at the tables because he has just been stricken with illness and is now confined to his residence."

"And he doesn't trust you?"

Turnbull made the thrust almost savagely. Apart from the extraordinary story he had been told, there was something about this man that he could not fathom. The fellow had a mysterious atmosphere clinging to him.

The other merely shrugged.

"I, too, am prevented from entering the Casino. Two years ago, before I entered the service of le Baron, I lost every franc I had in the world at the Casino. You know the rule,

the custom of the authorities? They paid me my railway-fare back to Paris, but said that I must never enter the rooms again."

"So, with you and the Baron both debarred, you want me to buy your system? Is that the scheme?" Turnbull spoke with harsh derision.

The man looked at him fixedly.

"You are pleased to consider me a crook, a swindler, monsieur," he replied with dignity. "The system is not for sale—a million of your English pounds would not buy it! The proposal I wish to make to you is that you play this system yourself."

"I?"—incredulously.

"At a fixed fee, monsieur. Say, a thousand francs each sitting. But le Baron is generous; he will not quibble over any fair price. With your permission, monsieur, I will take you to my master."

Turnbull felt hope stirring within him. It was a fantastic scheme, the idea of a madman, but he had everything to gain, and nothing to lose. A thousand francs a sitting. . . . And he could learn the system for himself. No, that would be dishonest . . . he would have to play the game. But a thousand francs each time he sat down. . . .

"All right," he replied ; "I will have a chat with Monsieur le Baron."

"It glitters like a diamond," said Elsie Summers, watching the radiant scene.

Peter Repington laughed.

"That is so good that I am sure you must have read it in a book," he replied.

"But look here," went on the girl ; "can you possibly imagine anything more beautiful ? Yes, now you come to mention it, I did get that phrase from a book about Monte Carlo I was reading in the train. There was another passage —a splendid one : 'In the golden air, a thousand windows shine like casements of romance, the sea melts placidly into the tranquil sky, and the mountains breathe tenderness and calm.'

"'Casements of romance,' " she whispered ; "that is wonderfully fine ! "

"Word-mongering ! But I'm glad you like it, all the same," said Repington.

"It was kind of you to bring me," she told him.

"You know our compact—where I go, you come too—whenever it is humanly possible," he told her.

She smiled her thanks.

"And quite a nice arrangement—but when

are you going to take me into 'The Temple of Chance'?"

"Still thinking of that novel?" queried Repington. "Come along; I have a few francs to spare. Promise me not to be too reckless!" he added, as they walked towards the entrance of the Casino.

Elsie's eyes glistened.

"How can one help being reckless at such a place as this?" she replied. She was looking at the sun gleaming upon the rich carpet, on the gold braid of the gorgeously-uniformed porters, on the impeccably smart page-boys swinging the double-doors wide for her to pass through—on all the glittering pageantry with which gambling at Monte Carlo is surrounded.

"Keep close to me." At the words she placed her fingers lightly upon Repington's arm.

She loved his calm, assured air of belonging to this place of the patricians. Evidently he was well-known, for, when they entered the "Bureau of Admission," the keen-eyed chief found time to smile before handing a card to Repington.

"It is good to see you here again, m'sieur," said that functionary.

"Don't be too sure of that," Elsie heard her companion mutter in reply.

They passed on into a noble chamber, a galleried hall, distinguished by magnificent marble pillars.

They passed through a door into a room the sight of which made Elsie, whose first visit this was, hold her breath in wonder. The long tables were crowded with men and women immaculately dressed, irreproachably groomed. The standard of beauty was astonishing, and practically every woman wore magnificent jewels. Those of the cocottes were the most remarkable.

"Here's five louis—I'm going to trust to your fairy godmother," said Repington; "you see what to do." He launched into a few necessary explanations, and then Elsie, leaning forward, placed a louis on the red.

"Novice's luck," announced Repington when, the red coming up, her stake was doubled.

"Is that all it is?"

"Hush! It is not so simple as you may imagine. People who win consistently at this game are few and far between. But there's a man up there——" Repington broke off, looking puzzled. Elsie Summers noticed him frown.

"My dear, I find I have a little job of work awaiting me even here," Repington said a

moment later ; " I'm awfully sorry, but do you mind if I postpone your little gamble ? There are some people I know in the ante-room. With your permission, I will leave you in their company until I come back."

Elsie did not waste time in asking useless questions. She knew that Peter Repington, whose Intelligence work ranked him as one of the most prized men in his country's Secret Service, never spoke idly.

" Is there nothing I can do to help ? "

" Not this time, old thing ! Not at all in your line. It's merely a bit of shadowing—and I don't suppose for a minute that it will lead to anything. But, of course, one never knows. Let me take you to the Prestons."

Having seen Elsie Summers welcomed by his friends, Repington returned to the gambling *salon*.

If what Basil Cleaver had told him was true—if Turnbull had been reduced to his last few francs—what was he doing here, wagering thousands of francs at a time ?

It was not as though he were winning ; although plunging recklessly, the man was a heavy loser.

A curious case, Hector Turnbull's. The man

had been convicted of selling national secrets and, although he had strongly professed his innocence at the time, the evidence against him was so overwhelming that there had been no alternative but to dismiss him ignominiously from the service.

Even now, according to Basil Cleaver, who had told him of his meeting the man in Monte Carlo, Turnbull maintained that he was innocent. But the stories which had drifted through to London since he had left didn't exactly corroborate this assertion. And now, here he was, gambling away what looked like a small fortune. Where had he got the money? And how?

The man he was watching so intently now rose from his seat with an exclamation of disgust and left the room.

Repington followed. Hidden behind a tree in the spacious grounds of the Casino, he watched Turnbull joined by a man the sight of whom made him knit his brows. That head . . .

Repington felt his arm touched. He looked into the face of a famous American detective —John D. Martin, of New York City—with whom he had worked before.

"Repington, by all that's wonderful!" exclaimed Martin. "Here on business like myself?"

" I thought I was going to get a little pleasure as well," replied Repington, " but," watching the receding Turnbull and his companion, " it doesn't look much like it."

" I can put something in your way," said Martin. " I came out to keep an eye on a certain lady who has a habit of mistaking other people's jewels for her own. She's in the local jail here—I think you may like to have a chat with her. She's a pal of a man named Wainwright—the fellow whose dead body was found here the other day. He was in your Government Service, I believe. Interested?"

" Yes, rather!" was the reply. Peter Repington decidedly was interested—so interested that, for the moment, he forgot Hector Turnbull.

In a great vaulted room, the like of which Hector Turnbull had never seen before, le Baron de Printemps talked of the system which was to reduce the great gambling establishment three miles away to ruin.

Turnbull listened intently, first because he had been paid a thousand francs on account, and secondly because the man fascinated him. The Baron, lying full stretch on a couch near the log-fire—if the room had not been so huge,

the visitor would have found it intolerably hot —talked volubly.

"I trust you. Although ruined, you are an Englishman. That is why I want you to play my system. If you follow my rules carefully you cannot fail to win. Your thousand francs a day will be merely your fee for going to the Casino. Do exactly what I tell you, and I will pay you a commission. Soon you should be comparatively rich."

The speaker's pale face became tinged with crimson.

"The first day's attempt hasn't been very successful, Baron," replied the other; "I hardly like to tell you what I have lost."

"Pst! It is nothing!" The white fingers snapped. "Haven't I already told you that we must not make them suspicious? Now, listen; you will dine here with me, and then go to the Casino again. I will send a car; you will come back here and report. I will have a room ready for you; it will be late, and you will be tired after the excitement. Is that agreed?"

There was a febrile excitement about the Baron's manner which made Turnbull wonder.

Still, he could not afford to quarrel with the man. If de Printemps cared to pay him a salary

of a thousand francs a day, why shouldn't he be content?

"Yes, I will come back," he replied.

With a trembling finger le Baron de Printemps pressed a bell. The man who acted as his valet entered.

"Luigi, Mr. Turnbull will come back after playing at the Casino—he will be staying the night. You—you will make all preparations?"

"I will make all necessary preparations," was the reply.

"*Faites vos jeux!*!" came the monotonous voice of the croupier.

Hector Turnbull slung five louis on the table, calling five numbers: 8, 15, 23, 21, and 18.
"En plein," he ordered.

In that moment he felt his arms seized.

"You'd better come quietly," said an authoritative voice. Turning round, he saw the speaker—a burly American, whom he had had pointed out to him as a detective. Beside him was a tall, dark, saturnine Frenchman, who eyed him curiously.

"Monsieur, it is required—by the police," added this figure of foreboding.

Turnbull rose, intending to struggle. But, with the considerate genius which the officials

at Monte Carlo always show in these delicate matters, he was whisked away without any appreciable fuss. Indeed, apart from the woman seated next to him slightly screaming, the incident would have passed off without any comment. That is the way at the Casino. They stage-manage such affairs admirably.

Peter Repington visited the police-station in Monaco later that evening.

"What the devil!" exploded Turnbull, when he recognised the caller.

Peter Repington offered the fuming man a cigarette from his case.

"I've got a pretty long story to tell you," he said, "so you might as well listen to it patiently."

"But to be arrested and thrown into this filthy hole!" expostulated Turnbull, looking round the cell.

"Highly necessary, as I hope to explain, Turnbull. Besides, the charge preferred against you was true—although you didn't know it; you were passing forged money at the Casino, y'know."

"I didn't know!" snapped the irate man. "I didn't know, you damned fool!"

"Steady, steady!" advised Repington, with perfect good humour. "By the way, I have

very great pleasure in telling you that in all probability you will be reinstated in the Service very shortly, Turnbull."

The other stared madly at the speaker.

" Damn you, don't joke, Repington ! "

" I am speaking the sober truth. It's curious how things turn out, but my coming to Monte Carlo has been the means of my doing you a double good turn—I have certainly saved your life, and I have also solved the mystery of those lost despatches, for the supposed theft of which you were dismissed the Service. It was Wainwright who sold those despatches, Turnbull."

" I always said I was a scapegoat for someone higher up—but no one would ever believe me. Good God, Repington, you don't know what this means to me ! I've been in hell ever since. I went to the dogs, to the gutter, nearly . . . "

" Which explains, no doubt, why you lent yourself to the present rotten scheme. But I will tell you briefly about Wainwright. He suddenly disappeared. There being certain suspicious circumstances, Basil Cleaver was sent here—where we heard Wainwright had been seen. Cleaver was called back suddenly, and I took on the job. Wainwright, I found, was being

blackmailed by some woman who had got hold of his secret, and rather than face the consequences, he committed suicide by flinging himself over the cliffs. He hoped, I suppose, that people would think he had ruined himself at the tables—the usual story."

"That must have been the case I heard some people talking about in the Café de Paris the other day. You have proof that it was Wainwright?" Turnbull asked eagerly.

"I have the confession of the woman on whom he spent the money," said Repington gravely. "You needn't worry, old man; your name will be completely cleared, and I shouldn't be surprised if you get a handsome compensation—you certainly deserve it."

"Damn the compensation! What I want is to be able to look a fellow like you straight between the eyes again!"

"You'll be able to do that all right." The speaker lighted a second cigarette. "Did you ever really believe in that yarn about le Baron de Printemps having evolved an infallible system for beating the tables, but being prevented from going personally to the Casino?"

"Not at first, perhaps. Later I did. At least, until the system proved useless. And, remember, I was desperate."

"What was your impression of the man Luigi?"

"I never liked him," replied Turnbull.

"That man," said Peter Repington gravely, "is the greatest criminal wanted by the world's police! He is a master of disguise, in spite of certain pronounced physical characteristics, or he would have been hanged many times over. His real name is Vivanti—Dr. Paul Vivanti. Years ago he was a nerve-specialist in Harley Street—a world-famous one too. But he had a kink, and he became a master crook instead. He has been working hand in glove with le Baron de Printemps, whose precious system was only a blind to pass false notes."

"It was for your own sake that I caused you to be arrested to-night, Turnbull. You will not be detained here; I have already made my explanation to the local police. They were quite willing to believe, after what I told them, that you were the catspaw of that specialist in underground diplomacy, le Baron de Printemps, who will now certainly be barred from entering the Casino."

"'Underground diplomacy'?" remarked the puzzled Turnbull.

Repington smiled. "That is a polite term," he replied. "Monsieur le Baron's real name,

unless I'm greatly mistaken, is Baron Strepoff. He is an unscrupulous Secret Service agent for a certain foreign Power. Vivanti, who has been mixed up with him in several affairs, knew that you had been chucked out of the British Diplomatic Service, and le Baron hoped that he could make you useful."

"But the 'system' — ? "

"Vivanti has an Oriental mind," explained Repington; "he uses devious methods, but they are generally successful. No doubt a false charge would have been preferred against you—you would have been arrested with the Baron's money on you . . . a net would have been cast from which you could not have escaped. As I have said, they hoped to find you useful. A man who was a King's Messenger for the last five years—vital years in European diplomacy—would assuredly be useful to Strepoff. And what chance would you have had? If you hadn't agreed to play the traitor, a charge of playing with forged money at the Casino would have been preferred against you. You would have been caught in a vice."

"This man, Vivanti?" demanded Turnbull.

"He has the devil's own luck! An hour ago the local police, at my instigation, raided the château, but, although they arrested le

Baron de Printemps, there was no trace of Vivanti. He seems to be gifted with second sight—or perhaps he recognised me in the grounds of the Casino this afternoon when he was chatting to you."

"No, it wasn't a job for you, my dear girl," said Peter Repington.

"The next time you will have to let me come with you," replied Elsie Summers; "that's another time he's escaped!"

"The next time will be the last time!" said Peter Repington grimly.

CHAPTER IV THE TRAIL OF THE SCARLET ENVELOPE

SIR BERNARD BANNISTER, C.M.G., and several other things, stretched himself in the comfortable red-leather chair and pulled at his cigar.

"I'm afraid you're losing your 'touch,' Peter," he said.

To Peter Repington, Secret Service agent, the jest had a sting. Back from Monte Carlo, where the infamous Paul Vivanti, the most dangerous criminal at large, had once again proved elusive, he flushed.

"If you are alluding to our mutual friend, Vivanti, I would remind you, sir, that he has laughed at the police of the world for some time now. Even Scotland Yard——"

"My dear Peter," quietly interrupted the Chief Commissioner of the Place-That-Never Sleeps (you reach it just round the corner from the Houses of Parliament), "you are unjust to yourself. I did not refer to the fact that Paul Vivanti is still at large. What I meant to insinuate was that you don't quite seem the same person nowadays. It is the considered opinion of your associates that you must be in love. Forgive me the indelicacy of the question, but is it your charming secretary? If so, your plight is easily understandable. If I were not such a hard-baked bachelor, I should ask Miss Summers to marry me to-morrow—no, to-day."

Peter Repington frowned.

"The relations of Miss Elsie Summers and myself are strictly unromantic, sir. We have business interests together—but that is all!"

"Liar!" said the distinguished visitor beneath his breath. It was a mystery to him why, with everything in his favour, as it were, Peter Repington did not propose to the remarkably pretty girl who was sitting in the adjoining

room of the small office in Piccadilly busily engaged in examining the contents of a cabinet-file. But, although Sir Bernard Bannister knew a great many things, he did not know that Peter Repington had resolved that, until he had captured that arch-fiend, Paul Vivanti, he would speak no word of love to the girl who had allied herself with him in this sinister quest.

"Business interests solely, eh?" quizzed the Scotland Yard official.

"Yes, sir. Vivanti recently murdered Miss Summers's own brother."

The other's face changed.

"Sorry, my boy," he said contritely. "Of course, I should have remembered."

"Miss Summers came to me for advice—as you know, this Vivanti business from the beginning has been a National Security Department affair—"

"It has become *our* affair now, my lad!"

Repington stared.

"Go on—I'll explain afterwards," said the Chief Commissioner.

"Well," resumed the young man, "Miss Summers accompanied me on the investigation of her brother's death—as a matter of fact, she saved my life on that particular occasion—and, having come into an unexpected legacy

of £7,000, she enrolled herself as my secretary—unpaid. Together we intend to run down this devil eventually——”

The Scotland Yard official put up a hand.

“ Ah, eventually,” he repeated, in a musing tone; “ but, unfortunately, time will not permit, my dear Peter, of any delay. Every minute that a man like Vivanti is at liberty represents, not only real, but terrible danger to someone. The time has come——”

Repington stiffened in his chair.

“ To take the case out of my hands, sir? Is that what you mean? I must see Sir Herbert Mandeville, the chief of the department.”

Sir Bernard Bannister described a circle with the hand holding his cigar.

“ Tut! tut! You mustn’t take it like that, Peter. You must be reasonable. You have had three attempts at getting hold of this highly dangerous criminal, who is again in England——”

Repington could not restrain his impatience.

“ Vivanti—in England?” he said, leaning forward.

“ Such is my information,” replied Sir Bernard Bannister, his tone a trifle more brusque.

“ Dr. Paul Vivanti, I understand, from a source which up till now I have always proved

to be extremely reliable, is staying at a certain hotel on the east coast," quietly went on the Chief Commissioner. "He has a companion with him."

Repington nodded.

"He is generally accompanied by a wealthy personage for whom he is performing some crooked work. But the nerve of the man—what name is he going by, sir?"

The police official was not to be drawn. Sir Bernard shook his head at the question.

"If you knew that, young fellow, you would be almost as well informed as I am myself. No, I won't tell you that, but I'll tell you something else—I'll tell you how I intend to trap this man you have allowed to slip through your fingers. Are you willing to listen?"

"I am always willing to be taught my job." Repington re-filled and lit his pipe.

"I shall take to the east coast," said Sir Bernard Bannister, "a vivid scarlet envelope. It will call for notice in the hotel letter-rack; I believe it will attract the attention of the man I intend to arrest."

The speaker rose, and Peter Repington followed his example.

"I wish you good hunting, sir," the latter said, shaking hands. "If you pull it off, you

will have done a very big thing. But why run such a risk? If you already know so much, why not have the place surrounded by ordinary police—or instruct a bunch of detectives?"

The Chief Commissioner became slightly pompous.

"My dear Repington, I intend to see this thing through myself. If Vivanti is half as clever as you have tried to make out, he would smell an ordinary detective a mile away. I intend to meet him on his own ground."

Repington controlled an inclination to smile.

"Well, as I say, sir—good hunting!"

It was necessary to take the hotel manager into his confidence. Thinking he had laid his plans well, Sir Bernard Bannister registered at the Hotel Metropole, Eastcliff, under the name of Major Basil Trevor of the Indian Army. He let it be inferred that he was home on leave.

"You say that no one answering the description I have given you is staying, or has stayed recently, at the hotel?" he enquired on the afternoon of his arrival.

"No, sir, I am quite positive about it. You will be able to see all the guests to-night at dinner."

Feeling that he had somehow been cheated,

the supposed Indian Army officer home on leave subjected every other diner in the spacious room overlooking the esplanade to a very keen scrutiny. But each person here seemed above suspicion. If Paul Vivanti was numbered amongst them, he was marvellously disguised.

Sir Bernard Bannister settled himself to wait. He rather fancied himself at the waiting game.

The users of the Hotel Metropole lounge were justifiably annoyed. To be startled out of their post-luncheon rest by an individual who rushed through the room like a madman (doing his best, it seemed, to upset several of the chairs) was distinctly disturbing.

"Confound the fellow!" snapped the Bishop of Erle and Ringwood, who had lunched rather exceptionally well. "He says he belongs to the Indian Army, but no gentleman would cause such a commotion—especially at this time of the day!"

Major Basil Trevor hastened on.

Walking out of the hotel at this moment was a man who had fallen into the pit which had been dug for him. He intended to catch up with this man, to clap him on the shoulder while he pushed a revolver against his ribs,

and say in a commanding tone: "I'm the Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard. You're arrested!"

Near the entrance, Major Basil Trevor collided with a person coming in.

"Confound you, sir!" roared a voice. "Can't you see where you are going?"

A bulky form blocked the way.

Infuriated at this delay, the pursuer made no bones about the matter, but elbowed the obstructor with deftness and severity out of the path.

He passed on, to see the man he was pursuing jump into a waiting motor-car, step on the accelerator, and speed away in a whirl of dust and a cloud of suffocating exhaust.

This was Sir Bernard Bannister's day for doing unorthodox things. Without waiting to weigh the pros and cons, without even troubling to see if anyone was looking, he rushed into a smart sports two-seater that did not belong to him.

A mile out of the town he smiled grimly. He was gaining on the fellow every yard. Feeling with his right hand for the revolver in his coat pocket, he coaxed a fresh spurt of speed out of the admirable engine.

Forty—thirty—twenty yards! Then he saw

the driver of the first car look back and throw something into the road.

There was an ear-splitting explosion ; Sir Bernard Bannister experienced the most eerie feeling of his life—and the first car raced on.

Alone.

**"EASTCLIFF MYSTERY
"STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF FAMOUS POLICE
OFFICIAL"**

Peter Repington pointed with his finger at the staring headlines.

"I've been waiting for this," he said grimly.

Elsie Summers puckered an adorable forehead.

"This?" she repeated, and then she saw the headlines. "Does that refer to Sir Bernard Bannister?"

"Yes," snapped Repington. "My uncle has just been speaking to me on the 'phone from London about this business. It's a good job we were on the spot. If I had followed my own personal inclinations I should have stayed a thousand miles away from here. That Scotland Yard Brass Hat was so precious cocksure ; he would just run down and see to it, sort of thing ! Of course, I thought the information he let out

was merely bluff and a blind ; I never once imagined there could be anything in it."

" But there was—apparently."

" Yes," conceded Repington ; " and what is the position now ? Instead of Bannister capturing Vivanti, *Vivanti has captured Bannister !* And the instructions from Town are that I—we—have to find him and rescue him at all costs. Rather rich, don't you think ? "

" Yes, rather," agreed the girl, " but if it will lead us to Vivanti——!" Into the charming face came an expression of determination which was almost startling.

" It *will* lead us to Vivanti—if only we can get a start," conceded Repington ; " directly we have finished breakfast we will begin operations."

A week had passed since Sir Bernard Bannister had stood in Peter Repington's Piccadilly office and announced his intention of effecting the biggest " bag " in a generation. For the first five days Repington endeavoured to shut the affair out of his mind, but on the afternoon of the sixth day he and his secretary-assistant took a train from Liverpool Street station. Arrived at Eastcliff, they booked rooms at the Regent Hotel instead of the Metropole ; he decided it would not have been politic to go to the latter.

The next morning, going down to breakfast, he saw the headlines in the *Morning Meteor*.

Breakfast was necessarily a hurried meal, and Repington's two-seater took them quickly to the Metropole—the finest hotel in the town.

The manager looked like a man who had lost a lot of sleep recently.

"Anything I can tell you, sir. It isn't much, I am afraid," he added.

"Suppose you tell me what you do know?" suggested Repington.

At the end, the National Security Department free lance looked glum.

"As you say, it isn't much," he commented.

At that moment, in a house perched on the cliffs two miles away, Sir Bernard Bannister returned to consciousness for the first time since he had met with a rather alarming experience.

He looked round and blinked. He did not know this room; he had never been in it before. To the right of the bed in which he was stretched was a window, barred on the outside with thick pieces of iron. Where was this place? And why should the only window in the room be barred?

"Congratulations upon your recovery, my dear Sir Bernard," said a voice that held such a

magnetic quality that the Scotland Yard official swung round.

He found himself staring into a remarkable pair of eyes which were only one arresting feature of a remarkable face.

" My name is Vivanti—I may as well introduce myself, since we have not previously met."

A thrill of excitement passed through Bannister's comfortably stout body. Paul Vivanti himself !

" You are to be congratulated upon the possession of a remarkable constitution, Sir Bernard," went on the slightly mocking voice ; " the ordinary man would undoubtedly have died from the shock of your—er—accident. You yourself, apart from a few superficial injuries which will keep you in bed for some little time longer, came off practically unscathed. I regret, however, that the motor-car you borrowed was completely wrecked."

Sir Bernard Bannister sat up in bed.

" You flung something which caused an explosion into the road in front of my car ! " he said. " That will be something else to be placed to your account. But your time has come now, my friend. I am going to arrest you. It was for that purpose that I came to Eastcliff. You may as well know it."

To his genuine surprise, the words were greeted with a low peal of mocking laughter.

" You are an optimist, apparently, as well as a fool," said the man he had threatened with arrest. " First, you concoct a ridiculous scheme . . . that scarlet envelope ! "

" You took it ! " exploded Bannister.

" Of course I took it ! " was the unexpected answer. " You had addressed the envelope to yourself, hoping that, first, it would attract my attention if I happened to be in the neighbourhood (your information on that point I admit to have been correct), and, secondly, that I should be induced to ask for the envelope either out of a spirit of dare-devilry or because I wished to ascertain if the contents of the envelope referred in any way to myself. I believe I am correct in thus reading your mind, my dear Sir Bernard ? Although I cannot compliment you upon your psychology——"

" You took the envelope ! " said the Scotland Yard official again.

Vivanti shrugged his shoulders, as though demanding what could be done with one so stupid.

" It did not occur to you, I suppose," he said, " that the pursued might wish to turn pursuer ? That the hunted might decide to change into the hunter ? No," as a look of astonishment

dawned in the other's face, "of course not! The weakness of the British police system, from the public point of view," went on Vivanti, "is that, instead of promoting officers with a practical knowledge of crime to the highest positions, dunderheads like yourself, who have little to recommend them but a handle to their name and a position in Society, are given control of a great Government department. Can you wonder that criminals gifted, like myself, with resource, imagination, and daring, hold such fools in supreme contempt?"

Sir Bernard Bannister would have flung himself out of bed, but a sharp twinge of pain restrained him.

"It is only right that you should know the exact position—I recognise that," continued Vivanti, "and so I will tell you how you stand."

"You are a prisoner in my hands, Bannister. I have no desire to be melodramatic, believe me, but I happen to be engaged at the present time in—we will call it private enquiry work, the complete success of which has been interrupted from time to time by persons of your damnable prying disposition. To ensure that no further interference of this kind will be forthcoming, I intend to let the authorities concerned know that you will remain a hostage

in my hands, and that your physical and mental well-being will depend entirely upon my being left unmolested to pursue those researches of political secret information which at the present time occupy my attention."

Sir Bernard Bannister was not a coward.

"If you attempt to carry out that scheme, you'll regret it," he said. "I came down here to arrest you, Vivanti, and I'm going to do it."

Paul Vivanti smiled.

As Bannister attempted a second time to spring from the bed, Vivanti touched a button in the wall. Instantly an involuntary scream came from his prisoner. Bannister had been given a powerful electric shock by some ingenious method.

"That should convince you I am in earnest," remarked Vivanti, switching off the current. "Let me assure you most earnestly, Sir Bernard, that it would be very inadvisable for you either to attempt any foolishness or to entertain any prospect of being rescued. Even if such a contingency became possible, your friends would certainly regret it. As you may be aware, Bannister, I have certain skill with a surgeon's knife ; it would be a comparatively simple matter, for instance, for me to deprive you of what little intellect you appear to possess.

A mad Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard would be a burden to his friends."

Sir Bernard Bannister had the sense to refrain from making any further attempt to reach the speaker. Nor did he provoke Paul Vivanti to other threats. For, when he looked at the man, he knew two things. The first was that Vivanti would not hesitate to perform what he had threatened, while the second was that he need expect no mercy from this human monster. None of the stories he had heard about Paul Vivanti could have been exaggerated.

Sir Bernard Bannister was not a coward. He had faced many considerable dangers in his time. But now the realisation of the true horror of his position swept through him. This man was not mad, but his sanity only made him the more to be feared and dreaded. He was the notorious, the infamous Paul Vivanti, the most unscrupulous and dangerous criminal-assassin at present disturbing the peace of the world. And he had been fool enough to attempt the capture of this man single-handed! Sir Bernard stifled a groan.

"I think now you have an adequate idea of the position," he heard Vivanti say. "This door will be locked directly I leave, and the window, as you can see, is barred. Moreover,

I have only to press a button for you to suffer the most excruciating agony by means of electricity. What you felt just now was only a sample."

The door closed behind him, and Bannister heard a key turn in the lock.

"We might as well eat," said Peter Repington.

"I quite agree," replied Elsie Summers, who happened to be very hungry.

They had recently moved to the Metropole, since the latter hotel had become the centre of their stage.

At dinner they were served by a vivacious Italian youth whose smile and high spirits caused Repington to enquire if he had been left a fortune.

The waiter gesticulated with his hands after laying down the dishes he had been carrying. Words came in a torrent.

"Signor asks if I have been left a fortune?" he repeated. "In a way—yes! That is why I am so happy—so joyful! For, listen, signor—one who knows has told me that in my throat I have a fortune of gold! I, Antonio Raffi, now merely a waiter, am to sing in grand opera! I shall have more money than I shall know

what to do with ! All this I shall do through the fortune which is in my voice ! ”

“ I see,” commented Repington. “ And who is it that has promised you all this, you say ? ”

“ Who ? Why, the patron, the great *maestro*, Bognolini. Has the signor never heard of Bognolini ? ”

“ There is no such man,” whispered Elsie Summers to her companion.

“ Of course I have heard of him,” lied Peter ; “ and the great Bognolini is living near here ? ”

“ He is staying near here,” was the reply. “ He heard of my voice, you understand, signor, and he came from far Italy to ask me to sing to him. I sing ; he is satisfied ; after to-night I wait no more at this hotel, signor ; but ”—lowering his voice—“ do not speak to the manager, please ; when I tell him about my voice of gold that is to bring me a fortune he jeers.”

“ I won’t mention it,” replied Peter ; “ and so to-night you see the great Bognolini again ? ”

“ For the last time—in this place. To-morrow he is to take me to Paris.”

“ Well, I’m awfully glad to hear about your good news, Antonio. When you are famous I will come and hear you sing.”

“ *Si, signor*”—with a flash of white teeth.

"I shall then have my photograph in all the papers—the great *maestro* has promised it."

When the future operatic star had gone for the next course, Elsie Summers turned to her companion.

"Someone is deceiving that poor boy."

"Perhaps. The 'great Bognolini' has a certain suspicious sound about him. After Vivanti, I hate all Italian names."

Sir Bernard Bannister tossed uneasily on the bed which he was afraid to leave. Was ever a man in such a damnable position? Even if he did manage to get away he would be the laughing-stock of the Yard. But he would not mind that, sensitive as he was, if only he could contrive that Vivanti was placed behind bars.

Mocking thought! He would never get away alive, much less be in the position to bring his captor to justice. While these reflections racked him, the door opened to admit the man himself.

"I hope you will be reconciled to leaving this country for a while," said Paul Vivanti; "my arrangements have materialised more quickly than I had anticipated. Also—I do not mind admitting the fact—your continued

absence—or ‘mysterious disappearance,’ as the newspapers persist in calling it—is likely to cause an even greater commotion as time goes on. For your sake, therefore, and for my own convenience, I intend to leave this house quite shortly.

“Where are you going?”

“To Paris, my friend. You will travel there in a crate.”

“A crate!” expostulated the alarmed Bannister.

“If you do not care for a crate, I will substitute a coffin,” replied Vivanti with a smile.

For some time after he was left alone, Sir Bernard Bannister was conscious of a peculiar noise not far from his head. He could not place it, however, until, looking up, he saw a pair of beautifully-shaped legs coming through the roof of his bedroom!

The next minute a figure dropped lightly to the floor.

“Miss Summers!” exclaimed the bewildered Police Commissioner.

“Hush!” said the unexpected visitor. “He mustn’t hear us talking. I have come to get you away.”

Sir Bernard Bannister choked back a second exclamation. This beautiful apparition who

had dropped from nowhere was wearing workmanlike breeches and a dark-grey sweater. In her right hand was a snub-nosed revolver.

"Mr. Repington and I arrived here yesterday," Elsie Summers went on to explain in a low tone. "We had some difficulty in getting any clue. Then Mr. Repington did not want to let me come . . . said it was too dangerous. . . ." She smiled in a baffling manner. "Whilst he went inside the house——"

"He's here now?" enquired Bannister anxiously.

"Yes—of course! But you're interrupting. I was saying that whilst he went inside I did some reconnoitring outside. I thought the roof would be quite a likely place to investigate. . . . That was a skylight I came through," she added, in a matter-of-fact tone. "But how on earth did you allow yourself to be here?" she asked.

Sir Bernard groaned softly. It was an humiliating experience to be lectured—how ever kindly—by a girl.

"I'll tell you afterwards," he said humbly.

Outside in the darkness Peter Repington turned to the police inspector who had accompanied him from the town.

"We had better go in now," he said. "You are sure no one can escape on that side?" He pointed to his right.

"Quite sure. There's a hundred-foot drop clean into the sea from the cliffs there—and this Vivanti fellow isn't a goat, I take it, sir?"

"He can be anything he wishes to be," replied Repington. "Your men are well posted? They know exactly what to do?"

"They can be depended upon to do their duty, sir," said the inspector.

"Right! Now for it!"

Together they walked up the front path of the house, which was perched like an eyrie upon the tall cliff, and knocked.

The door opened, and a man, his head held down so that his face was invisible, rushed out into the moonlit night. Screaming like a frightened animal, he had fled past them before either could recover his self-composure.

"After him!" cried Repington; and, turning, was off in pursuit.

The man headed straight for the cliffs. On the very edge Repington made a Rugby tackle diving straight at the fugitive's ankle.

Kicking like a mule, the other managed to get clear. One of the kicks landed on Peter Repington's chin. It was such a ferocious

blow that he sank back almost unconscious. Whilst in a state of daze he heard the man who had escaped scrambling away.

A few minutes later Repington was on his feet rushing unsteadily towards the house. Vivanti must have broken his neck trying to get away down the side of that hundred foot cliff.

He was twenty yards or so away from the house when he heard the furious throbbing of a motor-engine. The next instant a long, lean monster of a car shot past him at terrific speed and was immediately swallowed up in the gloom.

Rushing on, he almost flung himself on the burly police inspector.

“Who was in that car?” he demanded.

“Fellow who said his name was Bognolini, or some such thing,” was the reply.

“Ten thousand devils!” roared Repington.
“That was Vivanti!”

“Vivanti! I thought you were chasing him?”

“I thought I was,” responded Peter, and then stared blankly at a man he recognised as Sir Bernard Bannister came out on to the stone-flagged path. By his side was a girl—a girl wearing neatly cut breeches, a dark-grey sweater, and a provocative smile.

"Elsie! Miss Summers!" he stammered.

"I hope you will excuse me disobeying orders, Mr. Repington," she said, "but, you see, I was rather anxious about Sir Bernard. Some days ago I believe he was on the point of making love to me in the office, and——"

"She came through a skylight—most remarkable thing!" supplemented the Scotland Yard official. "And kept guard in case that fiend Vivanti—by the way, I hope you've got him?"

"I'm afraid not, Sir Bernard. I thought I had, but in the darkness I apparently picked the wrong bird. I chased someone who made frightened animal noises, but evidently it was only another of Vivanti's prospective victims."

"The waiter Antonio?" asked Elsie Summers.

"I believe so; he is much the same build as Vivanti."

"Where is he now?"

Repington shrugged his shoulders.

"The last I saw of him was on the top of the cliff, where he laid me out with a hefty back-heel. Friend 'Antonio is in this neck high, I am sorry to relate. According to the manager of the Metropole, jewels belonging to guests have been missing for some time. Friend Antonio has been the thief, apparently. Vivanti, short of funds, made the acquaintance of this

waiter, whose consuming passion was to sing in grand opera. He so played on the lad's vanity that Antonio became a criminal, for Vivanti, under the promise of helping this obscure waiter to become a famous operatic star, practically hypnotised him to do a little quiet burgling. The jewels he pinched from the bedrooms of the guests at the Metropole he handed to Vivanti—quite a useful little lot, too, seeing that they are valued at roughly £20,000. A neat scheme, and quite worthy of our old friend. But how are you feeling, sir ? " he asked the Deputy Chief Commissioner.

Sir Bernard Bannister shivered.

" Let us all go back to the hotel," he said ; " I want a bath, a hot drink, and some solid food."

" And what about Vivanti, sir ? " asked Peter Repington, with a slow smile.

" I leave Vivanti to you," was the answer.

CHAPTER V

THE HOUSE OF HORROR

FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT BASIL LORING, of the British Flying Service, had no business to make the landing. But it was safe enough ; and, as the girl had kept the appointment, he glided gently down.

"It was splendid of you to come!" the girl said. She was artistically made up, with the new cherry-coloured lips which had recently become so popular, and had a fascinating smile—at least, Basil Loring, living the almost monastic life at the nearby experimental flying-school of Lympne, thought that the smile was fascinating.

"I say, old thing, I mustn't stop here long. If you really are keen on going up—jump in!"

The next moment the giant propellers were sending out their thunderous chant, and the 'plane soared to the skies.

Half an hour later the circular flight ended in the huge field at the back of the small Kentish town of Hythe.

There was one spectator—a rather rummy-looking cove, Basil Loring mentally described him—who hurried forward as the machine touched the ground.

"Oh, this is my—father," said Miss Doris Chambers.

Basil Loring reflected that no girl could be entirely responsible for her father, and so he shook the hand which was held out to him. A cold, clammy-feeling hand it was, with extraordinarily long, thin fingers. It was like being gripped by the tentacles of some slimy fish.

"It is very good of you to give my daughter

such a treat, Lieutenant Loring," said the man.

The young airman became laconic.

"Not at all—oh, not at all, Mr. Chambers. Well, I must be pushing off." He looked at the girl, who looked in turn at her father.

"Can you get away one evening, Lieutenant Loring? If you can, I should very much like you to dine with us. It would be a real kindness on your part. I am a student, absorbed in my books, and it would mean that for once my little girl had some congenial company. Say you will come!"

Basil Loring did not like the speaker—nothing on earth, he felt sure, would ever make him like the man—but he conjured up a pleasant picture of holding Doris Chambers's hand in the firelight of a darkened room—with the father busy with his books in another part of the house.

"Thanks very much; I should like it awfully, sir. When shall I come?"

"Will Wednesday do?"

"Quite. I'll come over on my motor-bike. About what time, sir?"

"Shall we say seven?"

"Suit me top-hole. Good-bye."

It was ten minutes to seven on the Wednesday evening. The girl in the elaborate evening

dress of green chiffon looked across at her companion.

" I can't make you out—what's your game ? " Her tone was unpleasant ; stressed by something approaching fear, the veneer became stripped from her voice, which was now revealed as a common Cockney accent.

The man with the compelling eyes looked at her sharply. She shivered.

" My dear Doris——" he started.

" Oh, come off it ! " she expostulated, with nervous irritation.

" My dear Doris," the man said again, when his companion put her hands before her eyes.

" O God ! your eyes ! " she sobbed. " They frighten me ! What are you going to do ? "

" Don't be a fool ! I'm not going to do anything to you. Why are you frightened ? Here —smell this."

She sniffed at the phial which was placed beneath her nose, and some colour crept back into her cheeks.

" I suppose you think I'm a fool ? " she said.

" On the contrary, I think you are rather a charming girl—quite the type, in fact, to interest the young man who will shortly be with us."

The girl who called herself Doris Chambers locked her hands.

"I can't get you at all," she confessed ; "you found me down and out, when I couldn't get a job, not even in the chorus of a third-rate touring revue, and you said you wanted a companion for an old lady who lived in the country. You drew a picture of a lovely garden, all smelling of lavender and roses, with a little dream of a house, red brick, and covered with virginia creeper. In the porch would be sitting a dear old soul—your mother or aunt, I thought she might be. Instead of that, Mr. Simpson—of course, that isn't your real name ; you can't stuff me !—there's this great rambling place—and the sweet old lady has turned into a horrible old beast of a man who makes me feel ill every time I look at him ! "

"Aren't you comfortable here ? Haven't you good food to eat, a fine bed, the wages I promised you ? "

"Oh, I'm not complaining about any of these things, and I don't want you to think it. It's the mystery that I don't like. What was the idea in getting me to give the glad eye to that flying boy ? And why do you want him to think you're my father ? "

"My dear Miss Chambers," said the man with the compelling, magnetic eyes—and then the bell rang, cutting short the remark.

"Go and give him a hearty welcome, my dear," smiled her employer.

Flight-Lieutenant Basil Loring, being twenty-one, healthy, and keen on his thrilling job, was not given to much thought apart from actual flying, but he could not help thinking that this house held a strange trio—the girl, the weird-looking blighter she called father, and the elderly, stout, foreign-looking man who kept looking at him so intently.

Still, it wasn't a bad dinner, and there was the prospect of having an hour alone with Doris afterwards.

"I suppose, Lieutenant Loring, a great many new developments are taking place in modern flying?"

Mr. Chambers had broken in upon his reflections to ask the question.

Basil Loring looked up to find the eyes of the elderly man fixed upon him.

"Yes, some," he replied slowly.

"You must find your life very interesting, Mr. Loring," continued his host.

"Oh, it's all right," admitted the flying officer. He was feeling embarrassed. What was this fellow's game?

"I am something of an inventor myself,"

pursued Chambers ; " in fact, I am at the moment writing a book on the modern development of the aeroplane. Perhaps you could give me ten minutes in my study later on, Mr. Loring ? "

" Oh, of course, if you like," replied the flight-lieutenant, wondering what the fellow could possibly be gabbling about.

" You hadn't to ask for leave to come here to-night, I take it ? " now asked his host.

" No. I must get back by eleven o'clock, however—if you don't mind."

" Of course. Then no one knows you are here to-night ? You didn't tell any of your comrades, for instance ? "

" No. Why ? "

" Oh, I just enquired," replied his host, who seemed relieved. " I didn't know what regulations existed in your camp ; that was all."

" We aren't bally slaves ! " retorted Flight-Lieutenant Loring, and the others joined him in his laugh.

He himself laughed, because if he hadn't he felt he might have lost his temper. The laugh was a safety-valve. What was this fellow's object ? One of the things the C.O. was always dinging into them was never to answer any

questions about the secret trials which were constantly being held at Lympne.

Youth is resilient, however, and, when he found himself alone in the drawing-room with Doris Chambers, the feeling of vague uneasiness which he had experienced at dinner departed. It was very pleasant to sit on the big settee in front of the fire, holding the girl's hand. She looked a jolly pretty kid, wearing that green frock. . . .

"I want to tell you something," said his companion, "something that I think you ought to know."

"Oh, don't talk, old thing," he replied; "talking spoils it."

She snuggled closer, but, when he put his arm round her, a convulsive shudder went through her body.

Manlike, he asked the obvious question.

"Cold?"

She shivered a second time.

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"It's—it's what I ought to have told you before. I don't like that man!"

"What man? You don't mean—your father?"

"He's not my father. It's a long story, and"

—looking nervously round—“ I can’t tell you it all now—but that man isn’t my father—thank God ! ”

“ He hasn’t been ill-treating you—or anything like that ? ”

“ No ; but look here : there’s something funny about this house. You get away as quick as you can. And you needn’t be so decent to me ; I’m—I’m not worth it ! ”

“ But I’m very fond of you, old thing ! ” responded the bewildered youth.

The answer to that was a sudden fit of sobbing.

Loring soothed her as gently as he could, and the girl after a few minutes dried her eyes.

“ I say, that was rather a rummy thing you told me just now,” he commented. “ What’s wrong here ? I felt there was something at dinner.”

“ I don’t know,” confessed the girl ; “ but it’s—horrible, whatever it is. I feel sure of that. I ought not to be telling you this, I suppose—but I wouldn’t let him ask you too much if I were you.”

“ I didn’t intend to. Who’s the old bird who looks like a moulting eagle ? ”

“ I don’t know that either—but he frightens me too. And I didn’t like the way he kept looking at you at dinner.”

"I'll tell you what," Loring said, in the manner of one who has just been endowed with an inspiration ; "I'll pretend to fall in with all the blighter—the man who's supposed to be your father, I mean—says, and then pump him to see actually what is at the back of all this."

"Do you think you can do it?" she said.
"He terrifies me, I don't mind telling you."

"I'll have a jolly good try!" was the eager answer. "And, look here, if there's any funny stuff going to happen I shall take you away. We'll get married——"

"Oh, my dear!" cried the girl. She did not know whether to laugh or to cry. The thought of this clean, fresh, good-looking boy, who looked so thoroughly fit and emblematic of his job, belonging to her, was a heart-tingling sensation.

"Yes—we'll get married! I could easily get special leave. . . ."

And then the door opened.

"Could you spare me a few minutes now, Mr. Loring?" asked the man they had been discussing.

Surreptitiously squeezing the girl's hand to give her confidence, the young flying-officer left the room.

As Peter Repington entered the office, Elsie Summers looked up from the newspaper she had been reading.

"Do you know anything of Hythe?" she asked.

Repington reached out for the silver box on his desk and took a cigarette.

"Hythe? Rather! It's one of my favourite week-end haunts. Seaside and country combined . . . full of the dearest old inns . . . there's a brewery there, too——"

"I was not asking you to give me details about your misspent past," commented his secretary-assistant, who added in a different tone: "There's something very strange going on there now."

"Strange? At Hythe?" Repington appeared to be checking a smile. "It's a lovely spot. When I've made a fortune I'm going to settle there. Two golf courses, a cricket ground good enough for a county team——"

"This doesn't refer to sport—this is murder!" interrupted the girl.

Peter Repington's expression changed.

"Murder! My dear——"

A slight flush showed itself in Elsie Summers's cheeks.

"Read it for yourself," she said, extending the newspaper.

Repington leaned back in his chair.

"My dear," he started again, causing the flush to deepen, "I am tired of reading newspapers. At best it's a pernicious habit. Read the jargon to me, if you will be so kind. You have a most soothing voice."

Paying no heed to the compliment, Elsie Summers read in a clear, decided tone :

"MYSTERY OF MISSING AIRMAN

"WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO
FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT BASIL LORING ?

"MOTOR-CYCLE CLUE

"The greatest mystery still surrounds the disappearance of Flight-Lieutenant Basil Loring, a most promising young flying-officer, stationed at Lympne, Kent, who left his quarters last Wednesday evening at, it is estimated, 6.15 p.m., and has not been seen since.

"A singular fact in connection with the affair is that a motor-cycle, identified as having belonged to the missing flying-officer, has been discovered on the beach at Hythe,

having apparently been washed up by the tide.

"Flight-Lieutenant Basil Loring was extremely popular with his brother officers, all of whom predicted a most promising career for him in the service. Aged twenty-one, he was a skilful pilot, and is stated not to have had any private trouble. Certainly, as all who knew him agree, he was the last person in the world to have taken his life. Foul play is suspected, although our correspondent understands that the police—who are unusually reticent about the affair—have not yet come to any definite conclusion in the matter.

"A portrait of Flight-Lieutenant Loring will be found on the back page."

"H'm!" commented Repington, when the girl had concluded. "Let me see the photograph."

The girl handed the paper over, and Repington studied the face of an attractive-looking, virile, and sturdy youth.

"Funny about the motor-cycle being washed up," he said; "one cannot ride a motor-cycle in the sea very well. . . . But now we must get down to work, Miss Summers; are you ready to take some letters?"

"Quite ready. Then you don't think, Mr. Repington——?"

"Why do we keep a large number of police in and out of uniform, Miss Summers? Why have we a special branch of crime-detectives at Scotland Yard? Why—to solve just such mysteries as this!"

"Very well," replied his assistant, feeling snubbed.

Flight-Cadet Anthony Prince, late of Boston, U.S.A., circling over the large rambling house at the back of Hythe, wondered why anyone should wave a white handkerchief at him from one of the windows.

Deciding to investigate, he made a landing.

On his way up to the house he came to the conclusion that he couldn't ask the question direct. A confirmed reader of popular detective fiction, Anthony Prince thrilled at the prospect of investigating what was surely a mystery. Yet what remark could he make? How could he open up the conversation?

Then an idea occurred to him.

When the door opened, to show a man who regarded him intently with huge, compelling eyes that had a peculiarly magnetic quality, he said: "I'm from Lympne Aerodrome. The

commandant has asked me to make some enquiries about one of our officers who's been missing——”

“ Won’t you come in ? ” enquired the man at the door. Remembering that the detective heroes in the works of his favourite author never looked back once they had started on the quest, Prince accepted the invitation.

“ Do you smoke ? ” enquired the man. In spite of his peculiar and repelling looks, he appeared to be a decent sort, Prince decided.

“ No, thank you. I should like to, but——”

His host waved a hand which had exceedingly long white fingers.

“ You are not supposed to. That’s it, I suppose ? Quite right—smoking might be bad for your nerves as a flying-man. And now, what is it you wish to ask me about the unfortunate young man who—perhaps he was a colleague of yours ? He was ? How very sad ! I read about his disappearance in the *Morning Meteor*. What was the cause ? An unfortunate love-affair ? Gambling ? What is your opinion, Mr.——? ”

“ Prince. Flight-Cadet Prince,” supplied the other.

“ Mr. Prince. I was asking what in your opinion was the cause of this unfortunate young man’s suicide ? ”

" Suicide ? No one who knew anything about Basil Loring would imagine for a moment that he had committed suicide, sir."

" Simpson is my name. But young Loring, your friend, must have committed suicide. What other conclusion can one come to after reading that his motor-cycle was washed up on the beach here ? Either that, or he must have become tipsy, and rode over the cliff a little farther along the coast, not knowing what he was doing."

" I—" started Flight-Cadet Anthony Prince, when the rest of the words froze on his lips.

For a terrible scream had suddenly come from another part of the house. It was a girl's voice, too.

The man who had said his name was Simpson put a hand reassuringly on the young caller's shoulder.

" You needn't be alarmed," he said ; " it is only one of my patients."

" Your patients ? " stammered the flight-cadet, who felt suddenly sick.

" I should have warned you, perhaps. I am a mental specialist—that is the reason of my taking this large, isolated house—and I have a number of patients here. The poor girl who

has just screamed is a particularly unfortunate case. She has a mania that she is being persecuted and kept here against her will. So acute is this idea that she will wave a handkerchief to any passer-by."

"I—I think I had better be going," said the caller.

"Well, I'm sorry I haven't been able to help you," replied Mr. Simpson politely.

"Since you've raved so much about the place, I think I must ask you to take me to Hythe, Mr. Repington." Elsie Summers's tone was quite decisive.

"For the week-end? Nothing would suit me better. I'll wire for rooms at the Bonaventure. We'll make it a real restful time—a bathe if it's not too cold, a round of golf, a walk to Dymchurch. How will that suit you?"

"It sounds quite jolly." Elsie could have made a further comment, but she decided to wait. Peter had snubbed her once about this subject.

That night, in the lounge of the Bonaventure Hotel at Hythe, the representative of the National Security Department (Special

Intelligence Branch) was introduced to a young man in Royal Air Force uniform.

"This is a friend of mine, Flight-Cadet Anthony Prince," announced Elsie Summers. "He is the cousin of my American friend, Jessie Hurst. He's an American himself, but, whilst over here on a visit, he thought he would like to have some experience with the British Flying Service. Mr. Prince is going to dine with us."

"Delighted, of course. And where are you stationed?" he asked the guest.

"Lympne—quite near here."

"There's the gong," put in Elsie Summers; "Tony can talk to you at dinner. He has a story to tell."

"If it's anything gruesome, I refuse to hear it whilst I'm eating. Afterwards, if you like——"

So it was over coffee that Anthony Prince told his strange story of how, calling at a strange, rambling old house at the back of the town, from a window of which he had seen a white handkerchief being waved, he had heard a girl scream in terror.

"You didn't dream this, Mr. Prince? Hythe is the very last place in which I can conceive anything so melodramatic as you have described happening."

"No, I didn't dream it," stoutly replied the cadet. "I tell you it was too horribly real for anyone to have dreamt it. I used to think when I was a kid that I should like to be a detective; but if investigating crime means having that sort of experience, I'm glad I took to flying instead."

Repington took the cigar from his mouth.

"Crime?" he said questioningly. He appeared to resent the suggestion that anything of a criminal nature could possibly happen in his beloved Hythe.

"I believe that fellow Simpson was a wrong 'un!" Prince declared emphatically. "He may be a loony doctor——"

"There is a celebrated mental specialist named Simpson, and, now I come to think of it, he has recently given up consultations in Harley Street for a private practice." Repington looked at Elsie Summers with a self-satisfied smile.

"This man's real name is Paul Vivanti," replied the girl very clearly.

Repington stared at her amazedly.

"My dear girl——" he started, and then, seriously: "You don't usually make preposterous statements without some cause."

Elsie Summers remained unruffled.

"The remark I have just made was not

preposterous—and I had cause for making it," she said calmly and determinedly.

"And that cause?"

"Intuition. You have remarked about my intuition before, if you remember. From the first I believed that Vivanti was responsible for the disappearance of that poor boy, Basil Loring. The thing had all the characteristics of a Vivanti murder. You weren't interested at the time, but now, after hearing Mr. Prince's story, I am more convinced than ever."

"All right," said Peter Repington, springing up; "I'll make some enquiries."

At the small local police-station he was greeted with some news.

"Funny thing you should mention the Loring case, sir," said the inspector to whom he confided his identity, "because I've just had word that the body's been washed up by this evening's tide. I was on my way down to the beach. Perhaps you'll come with me?"

"I will—certainly."

On the way to the lonely spot where the gruesome wreckage of the sea had been taken the two passed an exceedingly handsome motor-boat.

"Nice thing," commented Repington.

"Yes. Belongs to a rich doctor, name of

Simpson, who's living in a big house at the back of the town. They do say that that boat could cross the Atlantic in fairish weather."

"I daresay. I wish I could afford to own such a beauty."

"The body's been identified, you say?" asked Repington five minutes later.

"Oh, yes, sir. Three officers came over from Lympne Aerodrome. They all said it was young Mr. Loring."

Returning to the hotel, Peter smiled at his assistant.

"I'm afraid that Loring did commit suicide, or rode over the cliff in the dark on that motorcycle of his," he said. "As a matter of fact, I've just seen the body, which was washed up by the evening tide."

"Any significant marks?" asked Elsie Summers.

"It was impossible to tell," replied Repington; "it had been in the water several days, you must remember. And Simpson is well known down here as being from London," he added.

"Paul Vivanti was from London originally," said the girl, steadfast to her idea.

"Well, personally," concluded Peter Repington, "I have no wish to go prowling around a

private lunatic asylum ; I brought you down here for a rest."

Woman-like, Elsie Summers kept silent.

It was such a slice that Elsie Summers joined the caddie in a smile. The ball went off her club at an angle of forty-five degrees and buried itself in a clump of bushes.

"That's a new ball, and I don't intend to lose it," she told her companion ; "you play on, and I'll join you again at the sixth. No, please don't wait."

When Repington had reluctantly obeyed her instructions, the girl turned in the direction of the bushes.

"I don't like losing new balls," she explained to the caddie. Immediately following the remark, she did a strange thing : stooping on the pretence of doing up her shoe-lace, and picking up a brand new Dunlop and pocketing it when the caddie's back was turned.

"I wonder if it went farther down here ?" she said, and plunged down the bluff. "You stay there, caddie ; if you find it I'll give you an extra shilling."

This seemed to be Elsie Summers's day for doing remarkable things, for, once she was out of sight of the caddie, she ran as swiftly as she

could until she reached the stile which separated the golf-course from a large field at the lower end of which was a house.

"That must be the place," she murmured, looking hard in front of her.

She was still looking when a wave of colour swept into her face.

She saw—or fancied she saw—something white fluttering from an upstairs window.

Taking out her own handkerchief, she waved it in return. The fluttering from the window increased.

It seemed as though Elsie Summers had forgotten about her promise to meet Peter Repington at the sixth tee ; for now she commenced to walk rapidly in the direction of the house at the bottom of the field. She carried her driver, and, when about a hundred yards away, she dropped a golf-ball and drove it in the direction of the house. It was a clean, accurate shot, and the ball went clean through an upstairs window, shattering the glass.

Two minutes later she was ringing the front door bell.

A man, the sight of whom caused her heart to give a great leap, stood regarding her questioningly.

"I have come to apologise," she said. "On

the way to the golf-course on the hill I practised driving. It was a simply dreadful shot . . . the ball went through one of your windows . . . I am ever so sorry."

The listener bowed politely.

"I have not succumbed to the fascination of the game as yet," he said, "but I understand from my friends that it is extremely easy to send a golf-ball in an entirely different direction from which one intends. The window does not matter, of course—but you would like to recover the ball, no doubt?"

"Oh, thank you," replied the caller. "It was an upstairs window." The white hand-kerchief had been fluttered from another window on the same floor as the smashed pane.

The man was very courteous. He held open the door of the room for her to enter. There was a neat hole in the window-pane through which the golf-ball had passed. The ball itself was lying on the floor.

"Permit me," said the man, and stooped.

When he straightened himself he received a surprise: the girl to whom he had shown such courtesy was holding a revolver at arm's length, and she had it trained on his heart.

"Please put your hands up, Dr. Paul Vivanti!" Her tone was very definite.

The threatened man instantly complied. There was a faint, incredulous smile upon his face.

"Really, this is a most astonishing occurrence," he said. "Perhaps you are not aware, my dear young lady, that this is a private mental home? Is it your intention to be included among my patients?"

Elsie Summers disregarded the suave sarcasm. She knew she was dealing with the most dangerous criminal in the world.

"My first object in coming here was to kill you," she said; "after that I intended to rescue the unfortunate girl you are keeping imprisoned against her will."

The smile did not leave the man's lips.

"If you refer to the poor creature who waves a white handkerchief from the window of her room, I may inform you that she is a patient of mine—as you will be after I have certified you insane."

Elsie Summers fought hard to keep her voice steady as she replied: "You will not commit any more murders, Paul Vivanti! I am the sister of the first man you killed, and I am going to avenge his death by shooting you!"

She fired.

. . . She was on the floor, struggling with a wild beast who tried to bite and claw her. Hadn't she killed Vivanti? She had shot straight at the foul creature's heart. Then why wasn't he dead?

Then came a heavy blow on the head which stunned her. Through the fading mists of consciousness she heard the enemy who had miraculously outwitted her speaking: "It was a brave thing to do, my dear Miss Summers, but you were a fool to think that I should have been deceived even for a moment by such a clumsy device. What is more, I recognised you directly I opened the door. Now you will have to pay the penalty of your rashness. My work in this house is finished, and I was leaving to-night in any case. In the circumstances you will not be able to raise any effective protest at accompanying me. In Florence, where I am going, I believe I can make better use of . . ."

Then the hated voice trailed off, and she remembered nothing more. . . .

. . . Remembered nothing more until she was roused out of her lethargy by seeing a man she had never expected to look at again standing before her.

"Peter—Mr. Repington!" she cried. "I was a fool!"

"*I* was the fool right enough!" exclaimed Peter Repington bitterly. "I scoffed when I should have believed. Instead of following your woman's intuition, I persisted in being the most pig-headed ass in England! But, thank God, I got here in time!"

"I fired at him . . . I thought I had killed him."

"No such luck, old thing! He must have ducked or something. Anyway, he's vanished; his corpse certainly isn't on the premises. But I think I've solved the puzzle: Vivanti was after the plans of the wonderful new British war aeroplane which Jimmy Brite, who is in the Air Ministry, told me was certain to revolutionise all future warfare in the air. The Government, I remember Brite saying, paid the inventor a cool million for his first design. This machine has been tried out at Lympne recently, under conditions of the strictest secrecy—even the technical pressmen weren't allowed on the premises. It's pretty certain that Vivanti intended to get what he wanted by devilish torture out of that poor chap Loring, who was the pilot selected to fly the new machine. Because he wouldn't talk, he killed

him. He had a client in the house, as usual. The girl, of course, was used as a decoy."

Elsie Summers nodded.

"But how did you get here?"

"Why, when you didn't turn up at the sixth tee, I naturally became anxious. Then I heard some fellows waiting to drive off talking about the rum things that were said to take place in this house. All of a sudden it occurred to me that you might be right, and that I was a confounded fool. After that I ran hell-for-leather here. Although I didn't realise it at the time, some of the men who had been talking joined in. A nice crowd we must have looked, with our brassies and niblicks. . . .

"But Vivanti must have seen us coming; anyway, the house was empty except for that girl, who was half mad with fright, and yourself."

"But we must get him! Surely he is somewhere?" exclaimed Elsie Summers. "We cannot let him escape again! I meant to kill him. I fired straight at him. Isn't he human? Where is he?"

Ten minutes later, as they stood on the hill overlooking the seashore of Hythe, after examining every nook and cranny in the house, Peter Repington supplied the answer.

"There he goes, I am afraid," he said, pointing to a handsome motor-boat which was cutting through the sea at a tremendous pace in the direction of France. "As for his being human —I am beginning to doubt it myself!"

CHAPTER VI**THE CURIOUS EPISODE OF THE
SWEARING GHOST**

THE man opposite Sir Herbert Mandeville, British Secret Service Chief, smiled and drew his own chair nearer.

"Yes, Sir Herbert," he said, "I've come all the way from the States to enquire into the thing for myself. The pity is that most of the real old-fashioned ghosts appear to have got disheartened and to have gone out of the business; but this fellow, if all the accounts I've heard are true, can be guaranteed to deliver the goods! He can make hair stand upright on the head of a bald man! But perhaps you're not interested?"

The Secretary of England's National Security Department opened his eyes.

"On the contrary," he replied convincingly, "I am very interested indeed. The fact that my eyes were closed is but evidence of that."

Indeed, Sir Herbert Mandeville was absorbed in the turn of the conversation. When he was not engaged in laying snares for the criminals whose activities it was the duty of his department to checkmate, he spent his time investigating the claims of various spiritualistic mediums and in examining other evidence of life on the "other side of the wall." Particularly was he interested in alleged ghosts, and many nights' rests had he sacrificed in the pursuit of this strange but fascinating hobby.

The man who had accepted his invitation to luncheon at the Five Arts Club had written previously from the Fitzherbert Hotel, Piccadilly, enclosing a letter of recommendation from the Psychical Society of America. Anxious to talk to a fellow-enthusiast, Sir Herbert had arranged a meeting. The luncheon had been excellent, and his companion entertaining. With the first mention of the Rockleigh Hall ghost, Sir Herbert had given himself up to a real sense of enjoyment.

Mr. Benjamin Chadwick, the man who had travelled all the way from America in order to meet an English ghost face to face, continued :

" Of course, you know the main features of the story, Sir Herbert? The history of this

particular apparition is included in the book *Famous British Ghosts*, I understand?"

"That is so," replied his host. "As a matter of fact"—a note of pride in his voice—"I had a hand in the compilation of that volume myself."

"So I understand. That was one of the reasons why I looked forward with such pleasure to meeting you. Now, Sir Herbert"—speaking with evident relish—"just humour me by narrating exactly as much of the Rockleigh Hall ghost story as you know."

Sir Herbert flicked the ash off his cigar.

"On a night in October 1542, Sir Roger Freyne, a nobleman living in the Buckinghamshire village of Rockleigh, gave a dinner-party. It was a gay and gallant affair, and wine flowed freely. Too freely, as it chanced; for Sir Roger, hearing the Earl of Rothersay speaking lightly of a woman's name, followed the Earl to his bedchamber, drew his sword, and plunged it into the heart of the Earl, killing him immediately.

"The fact that the lady whose chastity had been called into question was a relative of the murderer may have been some excuse for the ruthless deed, but the conscience of the killer would seem to have been disturbed, because

many credible witnesses have testified that the spirit of Sir Roger haunts the scene of his violent deed. There would seem to be just one flaw in the evidence, however——”

“ And that is ? ” questioned the other.

“ The ghost of Sir Roger Freyne, as seen by various witnesses, is wearing armour. Now that to me is incongruous. All the writers on the subject distinctly stated that, directly he heard the remark which the Earl of Rothersay was stated to have uttered, Sir Roger left the banqueting-hall and went straight to the Earl’s bedroom. The Earl had been carried to his room some short time earlier, overcome by wine. Now it is extremely unlikely that his host would have been wearing armour during a drinking carouse.”

Mr. Benjamin Chadwick’s eyes glistened.

“ That is just the point I was considering myself, Sir Herbert. Now, coming over, whom do you think I met ? ”

“ I’m sure I don’t know.”

“ Sir Arthur Freyne, the present owner of Rockleigh Hall ! Naturally enough, when I found out who this pleasant young fellow was, I raised the question of the family ghost. He tried to put me off at first—told me he was sick of the subject ; owing to the yarns about the

apparition the mansion has been lying derelict for years (his mother would never spend a night there), and he was tired of answering what he called 'damn fool questions.' But this he did promise—that I could spend a night in the place, and that I could take with me any friend interested in spirit phenomena I cared to choose. . . . What do you say, Sir Herbert? "

" By Jove ! I believe I should like to come. That point about the armour ought certainly to be settled," Mandeville said. " When can you fix it up, Chadwick ? "

The other tried to hide his excitement by lighting a fresh cigar.

" I'll let you know, Sir Herbert. It will take a day or so's arranging, of course."

" Of course," supported the Secretary of the National Security Department.

Sir Bernard Bannister, C.M.G., Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard, passed over the photographs with the air of a collector showing his most prized specimens.

" Yes," he said enthusiastically, " they're all beauties, every mother's son of 'em ! "

" H'm ! " commented Peter Repington, as he went through the lot, " they certainly look

a hard-boiled crowd. Swift workers to a man, I should say. Who's the gentleman with the mole?" He was looking at this moment at the keen, handsome, but unscrupulous face of a middle-aged man whose left cheek was decorated by a peculiarly-shaped mole.

The Chief Commissioner took the photograph.

"Mike Hennessy, otherwise known as 'Chicago Red,' on account of the colour of his hair. An American crook of genius. He specialises in the confidence trick, but will not stop at murder when there is sufficient at stake. He's got the most colossal nerve of any crook living. If ever you see him, Repington, run him along to me, and I shall be very much obliged. By the way, how's your uncle? I tried to get him on the 'phone yesterday."

Peter smiled. He was very fond of his uncle, but he had a mild contempt for certain of Sir Herbert Mandeville's characteristics.

"Oh, he's off on some fresh bogey hunt or other," he said; "why he wants to chase ghosts when there are so many crooks about I can't conceive, but he will do it."

"Ah, well, we all have our little weaknesses," commented Sir Bernard. "You won't forget to give me the tip if you see our friend 'Chicago

Red' hanging about? It's just about his time for coming to Europe."

Leaving Scotland Yard, Repington took a taxi to his office. As he passed through to his private room he saw Elsie Summers, his secretary, bending over a cabinet file. The temptation to kiss the back of the beautiful neck was almost overwhelming, but he overcame it. He had to remember his promise: that until he had captured Paul Vivanti he would not broach the subject of love to the girl he adored. It was an exceedingly difficult problem—having to spend several hours each day in the company of a girl with the radiant personality and intoxicating charm of Elsie Summers and yet to maintain their relationship on a strictly business footing. Only a fresh herculean effort each day enabled Peter to stand the strain.

Elsie Summers looked up.

"Lord Headbury has been 'phoning to know if you can put him in touch with Sir Herbert Mandeville," she announced.

"Come into the office," he returned, holding open the door of his private room. "I am weary and want refreshment. Do you think you could make some tea?"

"I'm sure I could." She set about the preparations at once.

Balancing the cup on his knee, Repington looked across at his companion.

"I am getting tired of that uncle of mine," he remarked; "between ourselves, what can be said of a man who leaves his work at a time like this——?"

"But you know the department is very slack," put in his secretary, a stickler for truth.

Her principal frowned.

"Please do not interrupt," he said. "I ask you again, what can be said of a man who leaves his work—jolly interesting work, even if it does lead me some highly fantastic dances and breaks into my beauty sleep of nights—to go chasing ghosts? *Ghosts!*" Peter snorted in contempt.

"There are such things, people say," replied Elsie Summers, who was sometimes dogmatic.

"Even if there are, what good can a man like my uncle do chasing 'em?"

"He is an earnest student of spiritualism—we had quite a long chat about it the other night. He is very sincere—and we all have our pet foibles."

"I seem to have heard that remark, or something like it, before. A man occupying the exalted position of my uncle should be above reproach: I take it that is what you mean?"

However, I'm tired of ghosts. I want to see humanity—preferably some exotic specimens—for a change. Are you doing anything to-night?"

"Not a thing," admitted his secretary.

"Then hie thee, girl, to thy lodging and garb thyself in the choicest and most saucy raiment available—"

"*Mr.* Repington!"

"Oh, it's quite all right! I was only going to suggest that we should dine and dance at the Café Blue Moon to-night. Any good?"

Elsie Summers wrinkled her adorable forehead in thought.

"I think I'll risk it," she said at length.

"*Bon!*"

Those of you who live quiet, orderly suburban lives probably do not know the Café Blue Moon. You have read of it, however, even if you have not actually seen it. A visit should be paid forthwith; the Café Blue Moon, lying due N.W. of Piccadilly Circus, is one of the sights of the Metropolis.

The crowds that throng it night after night are picturesque, picaresque, highly sophisticated, not to say exotic. A good proportion are also dangerous, for it is here that the big fish of the criminal world make their *rendezvous*. The

leeches of modern society complete their plans, and draw up fresh engagements, over wine at the Café Blue Moon. Benisty, the best-seller, says there's a novel a night there.

The management—suave, polite Italian men—do not welcome the presence of known police officers, but Peter Repington had a way with him, and consequently it was to one of the most sought-after tables on the balcony that Elsie Summers was led that evening.

The dinner was excellently chosen, superbly cooked, and admirably served. As he lit his companion's cigarette, Peter Repington decided that the world had not a great deal more to offer him at that moment.

"This place fascinates me," said Elsie Summers, drawing contentedly at her cigarette.

"You have the true enthusiast's zest," Repington assured her, pointing to the floor below, where dancing had started; "in that crowd, I wouldn't mind betting, are some of the most dangerous crooks in the world."

Her smile was half a challenge.

"I'm not proud," she said; "let's mix with them! I have every confidence in your ability to look after me, Mr. Repington."

"When will it be 'Peter'?" he asked.

A look of regret passed into the girl's face.

" You know our compact," she reminded him ; " but I do not wish to be sad to-night—we will dance ! "

Amid that gay throng it was easy enough to forget carking care and dull responsibility. The orchestra was perfect. Elsie Summers danced like a butterfly. She was easily the loveliest woman in the room.

Peter Repington was as happy as any man in the world has any right to be.

Yet suddenly he turned to his very delightful companion. His expression changed.

" Are you game for an adventure ? "

There was a quality in his voice which made Elsie Summers look at him curiously.

" What sort of an adventure ? " she enquired.

" It would probably involve you being made love to. And the man would be dangerous. Also, I should have to keep out of the way."

Elsie Summers pressed the stub of her cigarette into the ash-tray.

" It is scarcely the thing I should have thought you would have suggested."

" Hang it ! Do you think that I should even mention such a thing if——? "

She faced him. " This is business then—Peter?"

Repington flushed, and then drew his chair closer.

"Yes," he said ; "now, listen ! This afternoon I had a chat with Sir Bernard Bannister, the Deputy Commissioner at Scotland Yard. He told me that if I ever met a man with a heart-shaped mole on the left cheek, to try to take him along to the Yard."

"There is a man over there with a heart-shaped mole on his left cheek. He has been looking in our direction. Is he the person you would like to see making love to me ? "

"I didn't mean to put it as crudely as that, dash it !" Repington replied gloomily.

The girl laughed.

"When I entered into a working partnership with you, it involved taking the rough with the smooth," she remarked. "Every crook fascinates me, because I always have the hope that he will be the means of leading me to Paul Vivanti. If you want me to do this thing, I will."

"Hunting criminals has become a disease and a mania with me," Repington confessed ; "I never realised until now how low I had fallen. No, I can't let you take the risk, my dear ! "

Elsie Summers opened her vanity-bag.

"Look !" she said.

Repington caught a glimpse of a tiny pearl-handled revolver, and nodded.

" You are a very wonderful girl ; otherwise I should not allow you to take the risk."

" We will leave that out of it. What is it exactly you wish me to do ? "

" I should like to know the present and future plans of the gentleman with the mole."

" If you leave me now, I will see what can be done," replied the girl. " I hope not to be late for business to-morrow."

" Say, sweetie, you and I could work well as a team ! "

Elsie Summers shrugged her beautiful shoulders with a gesture copied from Hollywood's most famous vamp.

" I'm not falling for any rough stuff," she replied, sipping wine.

" Rough stuff ! " Judging by the indignation in his voice, Michael Hennessy's pride was wounded vitally.

" Over on the other side they would tell you that ' Chicago Red ' never does any rough stuff," he said. " Why, I take their rolls away from 'em without so much as raising a squeal. Some day, kid, when I know you better, I'll tell you of some of the ' plays ' I've made."

" You're a good talker ! " commented his companion, with almost studied insolence.

"Talker! I'll *show* you. Why, if you only knew the stunt I'm going to pull off in a day or so. . . ."

"Any room for me in it?"

He looked at her intently. Elsie Summers's heart gave a jump. Had she played her part well enough to convince this King of the Underworld that she really was on the shady side of the law herself, or did this declared Master Bluffer suspect that she was trying to "squeeze" him?

"No," he told her, "there's no room for you in it. It's not a job for a woman."

His companion yawned, showing a shapely hand and pearly teeth.

"I thought you were going to tell me something interesting," she complained. "Good-night! I'll be getting along."

Mr. Michael Hennessy caught her hand.

"Don't go yet, kid!" he pleaded. "Say, you're the loveliest thing I've seen this side of the Windy Burg. We'll have some more wine."

Elsie Summers slipped her hand inside her vanity-bag. What she touched was reassuring.

The wind howled dismally, and with an eerie note.

"I don't mind confessing that I was thankful

for that dinner, Sir Herbert," said Mr. Benjamin Chadwick ; " to come to such a place, and on such an errand as ours, without having fed, would be rather too much of a good thing, don't you think ? "

" I quite agree," replied that inveterate ghost-stalker, the Secretary of the National Security Department, pulling at his cigar. " The present owner keeps a small staff always on the premises, then ? The food to-night was quite admirably cooked, I must say."

" Yes, on the off-chance of anyone—preferably an American like myself—being attracted by one of the advertisements which are continually being inserted in the more important papers, a small staff is retained by the owner. Gosh ! I only wish I could afford to buy the place," the speaker added regretfully.

He drew his chair nearer the blazing fire.

" The ghost doesn't walk until twenty minutes past midnight, according to all the legends," Benjamin Chadwick continued, " so there's plenty of time. I really think we shall see something to write home about to-night, Sir Herbert."

" I sincerely trust we shall." The usually grave features of the Secretary of the National Security Department relaxed into a slight smile.

"I suppose a good many people would consider our waiting here a somewhat mad proceeding?" he went on.

His fellow-investigator turned.

"Since I had the pleasure of lunching with you, Sir Herbert, I've made the acquaintance of two men who have had personal experience of this ghost of Rockleigh Hall. The first was a priest. I was dining with some friends in Clarges Square the night before last, and this Father O'Reilly chanced to be present. During the course of conversation I happened to mention that I was taking the opportunity of investigating, whilst I am in England, the authenticity of various ghosts, amongst them the Rockleigh Hall apparition.

"The priest approached me in the smoking-room after dinner. He gave me a solemn warning."

"A warning?" ejaculated Sir Herbert Mandeville.

"A solemn warning," repeated the other. "He said he was not able to forget the encounter he had had himself with this particular ghost. Would you like to hear the story, Sir Herbert?"

"I most certainly would," replied his companion.

The American settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"The incident occurred many years ago, but, none the less, it bears the imprint of truth. Certainly I did not doubt the worthy father's statement; he was much too sincere. The way he gripped my arm when he was telling me . . . I have the marks still! Father O'Reilly, in spite of his religious beliefs, or perhaps because of them, was undoubtedly terrified. He warned me most solemnly and dramatically against ever putting foot inside this house. Of course, we have all heard the same kind of thing——"

"Of course," agreed his listener, "but tell me the priest's story, there's a good fellow!"

Smiling sympathetically at the other's impatience, Chadwick said: "Well, according to O'Reilly, this happened about ten years ago. The hall had been let to a wealthy South American for a time, and Father O'Reilly was invited, amongst a number of other guests, to a big dinner-party. The priest did not know until the last moment whether he could turn up, and his arrival created a *contretemps*. There was only the haunted bedroom vacant, and his host did not like, he said, to offer him that.

"As Father O'Reilly said to me, it seemed at the time as though he were being challenged—not by his host, but by the unseen Powers of

Darkness. He felt he could not, in justice to his calling, ignore this challenge ; and so he professed himself as not only willing, but eager, to spend the night in the haunted room.

" At first, none of the servants would consent to get the room ready, and eventually the butler himself, with the assistance of the chief footman, did what was necessary. I'm afraid I'm telling the story rather badly, Sir Herbert."

" On the contrary," replied Sir Herbert Mandeville somewhat testily. " I think you are telling it very well indeed—but please do get on ! "

Mr. Benjamin Chadwick acknowledged the mild rebuke by bowing his head.

" Father O'Reilly was very emphatic on the point that he was perfectly sober at the time he went to bed. Indeed, he stated that he had had only two glasses of wine—one of champagne and the other of port—throughout the evening.

" He stated, moreover, that he was perfectly calm and rational. He had sought help and solace in prayer, he said, and his nerves were quite controlled. He knew he had nothing to fear. I must say he convinced me on all these points, Sir Herbert."

The latter nodded.

" So composed was the priest that he dropped off to sleep almost immediately he got into bed. He was awakened——" The speaker stopped. Something like the scream of a human being in mortal terror sounded from close at hand.

" It is only the wind," said Sir Herbert Mandeville; " go on with your story, Chadwick."

" I was saying," complied the American investigator, " that the priest was awakened at exactly twenty minutes past midnight. As he opened his eyes a sense of helpless terror seized him. To use his own words, he was 'aghast with fear.'

" And, according to his own statement, he had a very good reason for being afraid. Bending over the bed was a knightly figure in full armour. As he stared, this terrible apparition raised a mailed fist——"

" Oh, come!" protested the listener.

" I am merely giving you the story word for word as it was given to me," replied Chadwick. " I agree it sounds preposterous that a ghost can inflict a physical blow, but the priest insisted that not only did he receive a blow from the mailed fist of the ghost which knocked him back with staggering force amongst the pillows, but that for days afterwards the marks of the

blow were distinctly imprinted on his chest. It is hard to believe, I know."

"It is hard to believe," agreed Sir Herbert. "The fact that a ghost can inflict a physical blow is scarcely credible. However, we may have an opportunity of judging the truth of the worthy father's story for ourselves to-night."

Chadwick raised his eyes.

"I believe that to be quite likely, Sir Herbert." There was a curious expression on his face as he spoke which, if the Secretary of the National Security Department had chanced to notice it, would have caused him some grounds for speculation. Sir Herbert Mandeville, however, was looking into the fire at the time.

"One more story about this ghost—if it does not bore you," continued the man who called himself Benjamin Chadwick.

"If it is half as interesting as the last—"

And the American plunged into a second narrative.

"This incident does not go back so far as the priest's story," he said; "it took place, I believe, not more than five years ago.

"The hall was deserted at the time. Not even a caretaker could be found to stay in the house.

"The man who tried to lay the ghost this time was named Matthew Durban. He was a solicitor by profession, but a most enthusiastic amateur criminologist in his spare time. Somehow or other he gained the idea that a gang of crooks were using this haunted house idea for purposes of their own—probably, it occurred to him, so that they could utilise the hall as a living-place for themselves as well as a storehouse for their swag.

"Quite a likely idea—or so it seemed to this Durban.

"What did he do but buy a couple of trained police dogs, and proceed with these to the hall !

"This young man was not above breaking the laws which it was his profession to observe," continued Chadwick ; "he contrived to effect an entrance to the house, dragging the dogs after him."

"Why 'dragging' the dogs? Did they evince any reluctance to enter the house?" asked Sir Herbert Mandeville, turning in his chair.

"They certainly did! I ran this man Durban down in his stuffy little office in the City yesterday, and he assured me that both the dogs commenced to whine and to hang back when within fifty yards of the lodge gates. He had the

utmost difficulty in dragging them into the house, and when he tried to pull them up the staircase—it was his intention to spend the night in the haunted room with the two dogs, after roaming through the whole house—they moaned piteously. Finally, one of them, after trying to escape from the lead, fell at Durban's feet—*dead!*"

"Dead!" ejaculated the listener.

"Dead! How do you account for that? But here I'm doing all the talking. Let me offer you another drink, Sir Herbert?"

"Not for me, thank you," was the reply.

A surprising change came over the face of Mr. Benjamin Chadwick.

"But surely——!" he persisted.

Sir Herbert Mandeville evidenced a surprising firmness.

"I have already refused to take anything else to-night, Mr. Chadwick," he said in a tone that admitted of no further argument.

"Oh, well, if you won't——" The other turned away. "If you are quite ready, Sir Herbert," he added, "we will adjourn to the—er—haunted room. I have had two beds put in . . . what the devil's that?"

The last words were uttered in a voice that held not only surprise, but terror. Suddenly the

light had flashed out, leaving the room in darkness, except for the glow of the fire.

For a few seconds there was a tense silence.

Then, from the direction of the door, there came a sound that brought Sir Herbert Mandeville's heart leaping into his mouth. The noise came nearer, then suddenly ceased.

By this time his eyes had grown accustomed to the dim light, and he was able to make out a form completely clad in sombre armour.

The ghost of Rockleigh Hall !

"I've come for you, Mike Hennessy !" said a hollow voice. It came from behind the visor.

Instantly a stream of profanity poured from the lips of the man Sir Herbert Mandeville had hitherto regarded as a cultured gentleman.

The most astonishing events followed. While he stared in amazement, the Secretary of the National Security Department saw the man he knew as Benjamin Chadwick whip a revolver from a hip pocket and fire twice in rapid succession at the apparition in armour.

Before he could fire a third shot, however, the Thing was on him, dealing sledgehammer blows with its mailed fists. While Sir Herbert Mandeville was still stricken with astonishment, Chadwick, with the horror on top of him, crashed to the ground.

A second later a voice—an undoubtedly human voice—said loudly and distinctly : “ Damn and blast this old iron ! ”

Sir Herbert Mandeville awoke out of his reverie. He knew that voice ; had heard it thousands of times.

“ *Peter!* ” he cried.

The apparition in armour retained his position on Benjamin Chadwick’s chest.

“ If you have a grain of sense left,” came the voice from behind the visor, “ you’ll take that gun away from this swine ; after that, you’ll fetch the handcuffs I’ve left on the table in the hall.”

“ But——? ” expostulated the astonished Mandeville.

“ Hell ! This fellow is a crook—and he meant to murder you ! ” came the startling reply.

After that Sir Herbert Mandeville hurried.

It was only when Peter Repington’s cosy chambers in the Albany were reached a couple of hours later that a full explanation was given the bewildered Secretary of the National Security Department.

“ I have to thank Miss Summers for putting me on the track,” said Peter Repington. “ What

the literary critics would call ‘the long arm of coincidence’ came into the thing a bit, I suppose, for it happened that, on the night of the same day as Sir Bernard Bannister at the Yard had been showing me the photograph of a certain hard-boiled American crook he expected to be popping up in Europe fairly soon, I caught sight of the very fellow in the Café Blue Moon.”

“*We* caught sight of him,” corrected Elsie Summers; “and what do you think he had the audacity to propose to me, Sir Herbert?”

“Goodness knows,” replied the official, who had not yet recovered from the shock.

“He suggested that I should allow that beastly man to make love to me!”

“And did you? I mean, did he? Dear me, what am I saying?”

“Sufficiently to allow me to get the information I required,” smiled back the girl.

“But——” started Sir Herbert Mandeville, still befogged.

“I’ll tell you as simply as possible, uncle,” replied Repington. “This crook, who is known to the Yard as ‘Chicago Red,’ wanted to get you out of London and away from all help. His purpose was to murder you—now, wait a minute and everything will be explained! I repeat that his purpose was to murder you—

although the verdict at the inquest would have been ‘Death by natural causes,’ or ‘Mis-adventure,’ or something equally pot-house. With considerable subtlety he played upon your pet weakness—this ghost-hunting rubbish—to such an extent that he was able to lure you down to that supposed haunted house. He knew very well that, absorbed by your pet obsession, you would be off your guard somewhat; the shrewdest men have their stupid moments, as we both know from experience. It was a clever scheme—a devilishly clever scheme, in fact! Look here, uncle, did you have anything to drink with this man? ”

“ He suggested a night-cap of whisky, but I refused.”

“ Lucky for you! I happen to know that that whisky and soda would have been drugged with one of the most fiendish poisons known—or, rather, unknown, because there aren’t many chemists in this country, or, indeed, Europe, who know anything about it. Tomorrow”—taking a bottle from his pocket—“ I’m going to see Pryor about this; he ought to be able to give me an inkling of what’s in it.”

“ Poison! ” exclaimed Sir Herbert.

“ Yes, sir. It would have affected your

heart to such an extent that when the bogus ghost——”

“Bogus ghost!” Sir Herbert Mandeville’s usually disciplined brain was now completely out of control. “He told me the most astounding things—stories about priests being awakened in the night and dogs dying——”

“Simply artistic padding. The fellow had imagination, and he played you up. I’m afraid, uncle, you’ve been a bit of a fool over this job. Shall I push on?”

“Please!” replied Mandeville stiffly.

“Friend Hennessy had hired a brother thug to get inside this armour and impersonate the joker who’s supposed to keep himself busy haunting this show. When I got the necessary idea of what was due to happen, I hopped down and beat the other crook to it—that’s all. Only, as I wanted to get to work pretty badly, I made my appearance rather earlier than had been arranged.”

“And the other man?”

“Oh, I left him trussed up like a fowl, with a gag in his mouth to keep him quiet. He doesn’t matter. Neither does ‘Chicago Red,’ if it comes to that. The man who planned the whole thing never appeared, more’s the pity!”

"The man who planned it—what man are you talking about?"

"Paul Vivanti! He wanted to get at me through you. Besides, you were too dangerous an adversary to allow to go on living. It was his brain at the back of the scheme—but I wonder if 'Chicago Red' received his fee!" replied Peter Repington grimly.

CHAPTER VII THROUGH THE GATES OF DARKNESS

ARE you busy?" asked Elsie Summers.

"Frightfully!" replied Peter Repington.

"May I enquire at what?" persisted his secretary.

"Look here, this paper says if you multiply 1,000 by 214 you'll get——"

"A headache, I should imagine," cut in the girl. Elsie Summers regarded the immaculately-brushed, bent head. "Can you tear yourself away from your brain-racking problem for a few minutes, so that I can talk to you about something serious?"

Peter Repington swung round in his chair.

"Consider me entirely at your service, my dear Miss Summers," he said.

His secretary ignored the slightly-mocking smile.

"The greatest friend I had in the world has suddenly disappeared," she said, "and I want your help in finding her."

"Let me hear the full story, please," replied Repington immediately. There was no trace of levity about him now; the handsome face was composed, almost stern, and there was that expression of earnestness in his eyes which Elsie Summers remembered so well.

She took off gloves and hat and laid them on the table.

"Thank you," she said simply; "in spite of your ineffectual attempts to play the fool, you are really a serious person at heart. I will tell you what I know about poor Vania Dean."

"The actress? 'The most beautiful woman in London,' as she has been called? Why, I danced with her only two nights ago!"

"At the Gates of Rapture Cabaret?"

"I am reluctant to confess that I am in the habit of visiting a place with such a preposterous name—but, yes, it was at the Gates of Rapture Cabaret."

"How did she seem then?"

"She seemed to me to be almost unbelievably beautiful. If I had not already lost my heart——"

"Please!" she protested. Repington noticed that her eyes were full of tears; he felt instantly sorry.

"Was she excited?"

"Miss Dean? Well, since you mention it, she did appear to be tremendously elated. That was towards the end of the evening; when I first saw her she looked very worried and distraught."

Elsie Summers made a gesture of despair with her beautiful hands.

"With all your knowledge of the world, you are a child in some things," she said; "did not Vania Dean's change in demeanour suggest something to you?"

Peter stared at her in surprise.

"No, I can't say that it did," he replied, wondering what was in her mind. "After all, it isn't very surprising to find a girl gloomy one hour and excited the next. That is the prerogative of the sex, surely? And the more beautiful the girl happens to be, the more likely she is to switch off from rain to sunshine. At least, that is my experience."

Elsie Summers shook her head.

"Didn't it occur to you that Vania Dean might have been taking drugs?" she asked.

"Drugs!" exclaimed Repington, thoroughly startled. "A beautiful girl like that a dope-taker! Good Lord! you don't mean to say that——?"

"I have had reason to believe for some time that Vania had fallen into the habit of taking drugs," was the sorrowful reply. "I tried to get her to confess, to confide in me, but she always evaded the subject and tried to put me off. It was terribly sad. From the first I felt hopeless; and now——"

"But are you sure your friend has disappeared? She may merely have gone away for a rest, or change, or something," suggested Repington.

Again Elsie Summers shook her head.

"No, there's no chance of that. Nothing has been given out to the newspapers as yet, but the Orpheum Theatre management are convinced that Vania would not leave them in the lurch like this without any warning. Last night her understudy played the part—but the success of the piece absolutely depends on Vania, and, if she continues to be missing, they will have to close the theatre. Mr. Derwent said that he would be willing to pay you any fee you might name——"

"We can dismiss that!" was the sharp

retort ; " since you have asked me, I shall be very pleased to do anything I can in the matter ; the very fact that Miss Dean is your friend is sufficient. As for the fee—if I earn it—let Mr. Derwent give it to charity. Now, first, why do you think that Miss Dean had become a drug-taker ? "

" By her conversation more than anything else. Although there were also those singular fits of black depression, followed by spasms—I cannot call them anything else—of abnormal gaiety and hectic excitement. The trouble with Vania," she continued, " was that all the wonderful admiration she received went to her head. She became so nervy that she couldn't live without some excitement all the time. Instead of returning home and resting after the theatre, she would go straight to some dance-club and jazz away till the early hours of the morning. If she hadn't had a simply wonderful constitution, she could never have preserved her beauty in the way she has done. But that Gates of Rapture place—"

" Apart from its name—and I have already agreed that that is quite preposterous—what is wrong with the smartest night-club in London ? " asked Repington.

For reply, Elsie Summers drew a newspaper

cutting from her vanity-bag and passed it over.

Somewhat surprised, Peter Repington read :

**"STARTLING REVIVAL OF DRUG TRAFFIC
"GETTING AT THE HEART OF THE CONSPIRACY"**

Repington looked at his secretary.

"What sensational rubbish is this?" he demanded.

The girl stared him out.

"The man who wrote that article is one of the most reliable and brilliant journalists in London," she said, "and he came to me to get the facts."

"To you?"

"To me. I haven't mentioned the circumstance to you, Mr. Repington, but I have been a frequenter of the Gates of Rapture Cabaret for some time."

"The deuce you have!" Peter recalled various little episodes, innocent enough in themselves, but about which he was not particularly pleased that Elsie Summers should know. "But I never recognised you there!" he added quickly.

"No; I went disguised," was the astonishing reply.

"Disguised!" Repington so far forgot himself as to burst into a laugh. "Don't be so overwhelmingly preposterous!" he said.

The girl's face stiffened.

"I am not preposterous; I am terribly in earnest," was the reply she gave. "When one is fighting for the soul of the person one loves best in the world, one does not hesitate to stoop to anything!"

"I'm most horribly sorry!" said Repington penitently.

The girl pointed to the newspaper article which Repington had placed on the desk.

"Read it," she said.

Peter read :

"Once again the West End of London has become the hunting-ground of the international drug traffickers' agents. And the danger is more real now than ever it has been before.

"When the police of this country some years ago set out to sweep away the illicit drug traffic, they did the job pretty thoroughly.

"One after another they rounded up and deported all the foreign undesirables who were the brains and the strength of that tentacle of the drug octopus which had spread

itself over this country—Madame Iassonides, the Greek adventuress ; Edgar Manning ; Brilliant Chang, and half a dozen others.

“ But their work went much farther than that. They chivvied other dangerous traffickers out of the country ; broke up organisations for the smuggling in of forbidden drugs ; supplied useful information to foreign police departments ; and closed a number of clubs and cafés which were recognised meeting-places for drug addicts, and the men who supplied them.

“ Then they traced practically every one of the pawns in this iniquitous game—largely women of the unfortunate class who were deliberately converted into drug-takers, and then forced to act as agents and saleswomen under threat of a complete stoppage of supplies.

“ The authorities, having reduced a very serious menace to comparatively insignificant proportions, were compelled to turn their attention elsewhere, and the ‘dope men’ of the Yard became specialists in the detection of coiners, forgers, letter-box thieves, and motor bandits.

“ Anything like a serious effort to re-introduce drugs into the clubs, the theatres,

and the night-cafés was nipped promptly in the bud, but, apart from that, the authorities paid little attention to this particular form of law-breaking.

" THE NEW TRAFFIC

" Gradually, as they became definitely conscious of this shifting of official attention, the dope pedlars crept back into the big cities of England, and commenced once more to spread their virus of moral, mental, and physical ruin.

" But they did it slowly, cunningly, operating on entirely new lines, and gradually building up an entirely new and different clientele. In the place of the street women, the foolish young women, and the degenerates, upon whom they had formerly relied for their income, they commenced to angle for society women, and for the wealthier members of the various professions.

" Their progress was slow, but it was terribly sure. And the traffickers soon found that, by dealing almost exclusively with men and women of money and position, they made the task of avoiding detection comparatively simple.

" There was no longer the risk of drug-maddened women creating scenes in the street, or of men appearing in public showing obvious signs of the condition they were in. The new drug-takers kept their vice a secret, and snuffed cocaine or smoked opium behind the shelter of locked doors in houses which were in many cases above suspicion.

" That state of affairs might have continued indefinitely, but, as one man prospered, so two more avaricious traffickers joined in the game, and before very long it became necessary to extend the circle of addicts or there would not have been enough profit to go round.

" HARDER TO TRACE

" The result was that suave, smooth-tongued salesmen began to appear in the better-class West End bars and the night-clubs which cater only for a class which can afford to pay big money. There they spread the evil upon which they batten amongst the women friends of the male habitués.

" They have still kept their clientele fairly select, but, as it gets wider, so does it degenerate in tone. To-day drug-taking and

drug-selling are almost as prevalent in the West End of London as they were two or three years ago, while there is the danger that, unless something is done quickly, the downward trend will overtake all the old 'crowd' again.

"Are the police authorities sufficiently awake to the terrible danger which threatens? Do they know, for instance, that one of the most celebrated dance-clubs in the heart of the West End—a place where outwardly all is clean and decent, if a trifle hectic—is actually the headquarters of this new type of dope-runner?

"Human souls are nightly being lost in this gilded den of secret vice and hidden iniquity."

Coming to the end of the article, Peter Repington looked across at his assistant.

"Who wrote this?" he asked.

Elsie Summers mentioned a name. The man was well known to the National Security Department free lance as a fearless but thoroughly dependable pressman of the "Special Commissioner" type.

"Good God! And I never had an idea!" he said. "I'll go to the Gates of Rapture again to-night—but, like you, I'll go disguised."

This was not the first time that Peter Repington had risked very serious danger in trying to run down a dope-gang. In Brilliant Chang's sordid reign he had penetrated many times to the innermost recesses of Limehouse ; and it was comparatively easy for him to simulate all the characteristics which mark out the unfortunate drug-addict. As a further precaution, he so changed his general appearance that even Elsie Summers had failed to recognise him.

The girl had wished to accompany him, but he had persuaded her to stay at home. "I don't quite know where to-night's business will lead me," he said in explanation.

Arrived at the Gates of Rapture Cabaret—it was strange he had not thought what a curiously significant name the place had for those interested either as addicts or purveyors in the drug traffic—he lost no chance of demonstrating to all who had eyes to see that he had become one of the lost ones whose bodies and souls are in torment every time that they are not under the domination of the particular drug to which they are enslaved.

Time passed, and, with all his shrewd quick-sightedness, he was not able to notice anything which was in the least degree suspicious. Could Elsie Summers possibly have been mistaken ?

Had that newspaper-writer concocted a sensational article merely to get money ?

A girl, charming and fascinating, one of the smart coquettes of the underworld, sauntered up to him, hips swaying, lips curved provokingly.

" You look all ends up, boy ! " she said, with the *camaraderie* of her class ; " I know what you want."

" I'm sick of drink," protested Repington, playing up to her.

The girl looked round. Then she took him by the arm.

" Can't let everyone hear," she said cautiously.
" Let's slip over to that corner."

Feeling that he was on the track of something at last, he allowed himself to be led away.

" Haven't you any ' coke ' ? " asked the girl, when they were seated side by side in the discreetly shaded corner.

" My God ! " replied Repington, " I can't put my hands on any ! Someone said "—he lowered his voice—" that here——" He broke off. " Is that right ? Can you get me any ? Who's the fellow to see ? "

The girl put a finger-tip to her lip.

" Hush ! " she said.

" But is there anyone ? " persisted Repington.

" Yes, there is—but you are supposed to have

an introduction to him. It's too risky for him to be running any chances."

"Of course," agreed her companion readily, "but you will get me some, kid, won't you?" The stage lost a good recruit when Peter Repington became a detective.

"If I can. He—the man should be here now. He usually is."

"Can't you tell me his name?" asked Repington.

The girl's face changed.

"Here, are you a spy?" she cried. Her words, uttered in a loud tone, carried. Peter could see people looking curiously in their direction.

"Don't be a fool!" he said, realising that his only chance of preventing what might prove a dangerous row was to bluff this girl as thoroughly as possible. "Can't you see that I'm crazy without 'coke'? I came here to get some. . . ." He broke off, his hands working furiously.

"I'm sorry, old thing, but one can't be too careful, even in a place like this, which the police don't seem to know about. But Bayeur is very particular about his name being mentioned. I want some myself. . . . Why isn't he here?"

As bad luck would have it, the man Bayeur

did not show up at all that evening; but, staying by the side of the beautiful *demi-mondaine*, Peter gleaned sufficient incriminating information to have enabled him to put that enterprising gentleman away behind prison bars for a long "stretch." He learned, for instance, that Bayeur was the distributor-in-chief of parcels of unadulterated drugs, which were smuggled into the country—how? No, she did not know that, the girl stated, although she had heard that the headquarters of the international gang, of which Bayeur was a member, was at Basle, in Switzerland, and that they received a good deal of their secret supplies from Japan.

"I don't care a damn where they get it from, so long as friend Bayeur shows up to-night," commented Peter Repington, storing the information away for future reference.

At one o'clock Peter Repington left the club. Knowing how interested Elsie Summers would be to hear how he had progressed, he drove to her flat off Baker Street.

He was sufficiently a trusted friend to have a key, and, knowing that Elsie would be waiting up, he entered.

The sitting-room was empty and in darkness, but the first thing he noticed when he switched on the light was a sheet of paper.

Hurriedly he scanned the written words.

"Got on the trail myself. Have heard from Vania Dean. Wait in your rooms; when I can I will 'phone—or get a message through—somehow—"

"E. S."

With her heart beating out great hammer-strokes, Elsie Summers faced her enemy defiantly. She knew that she could expect no mercy, but she refused to show any fear to this creature, who was more fiend than man.

"So!" said Paul Vivanti, rubbing the abnormally long fingers of his white hands gently together; "we meet again, Miss Summers—for, I am afraid, the last time!"

She remained silent. But for the fact that she was unarmed, and that a revolver-butt could be seen peeping from Vivanti's right coat-pocket, she would have fallen on this monster and tried to squeeze the life out of his abominable body.

From behind crept a hand. It held a chloro-formed-soaked rag. After the first agonised surprise, it was useless to struggle. She felt herself falling into a pit that had no bottom.

When she awoke from that forced sleep, her terror became magnified, if possible. A mountain of a man, with gross face and podgy hands, was regarding her greedily.

"The doctor is otherwise engaged, so it has fallen to my task to entertain you. Needless to say, it is a pleasant task," continued the man, who added : " My name is Chadderly."

Chadderly !

This, then, was the man whose name she had heard spoken in whispers at the Gates of Rapture Cabaret. He was regarded as a powerful person there. No wonder—if he was a lieutenant in the gigantic dope-gang which was once again casting its shadow over the whole of the West End of London. Chadderly ! " Uncle Harry " Chadderly, as he was called, because of his ostentatious *bonhomie*.

Directly she looked at the man, Elsie Summers knew that this supposed good-fellowship was but the thinnest veneer. This man was a libertine—and, because of the look in his huge face, she shrank from him.

A glance round the room told her there was no chance of escape. The man stood before the door, almost blotting it out. The air she breathed was dank ; she must be in a cellar—a place underground.

Brave as she was, her heart sank. If only she had her revolver. . . .

The man who had been appointed her jailer was in high spirits. The chief was keeping the other girl—God ! how lovely she was !—to himself, but this one was captivating enough.

“ My dear,” he said, “ you might try to be sociable.”

Elsie laughed. It was a laugh of almost sheer hysteria.

“ I would rather die than go near you.”

The mammoth shrugged his shoulders, but his pig-like eyes narrowed.

“ You may be very pleased to change your tone a little later on ; I understand that my ingenious chief is preparing something rather unpleasant for you. You have had several warnings, apparently, and now——”

The girl tried to stop herself shivering.

“ You have had a long journey, and no doubt are hungry. I will order some food,” observed the man, striking a bell.

Instead of the door opening, a panel swung in the wall. Chadderly gave some sharp instructions, and soon, through this panel, which was not large enough for her to have thrust her body, even if there had been no one to prevent her escape, came food and drink.

Her eyes fell hungrily on the tray.

"It was not considered politic—shall I say?—to send you a knife or fork," smirked Chadderly, and the faint hope which she had had departed, leaving her heart leaden.

"But you will find both the food and wine excellent," went on Chadderly, "and I can assure you that neither is poisoned."

She hated herself for it, but she was forced to cringe.

"Oh, I know I have to die!" she said; "but, if you have any mercy, let me see the sky before—before——"

"Anything to oblige a lady," replied her jailer, and, touching a switch in the wall, a solid section of the wall moved aside. Through it came the sweet air of the countryside, the sounds of twittering birds, the distant passing of a motor-car. . . . Through it Elsie could see the blue vault of heaven. . . .

"No, you don't, my dear!" cried Chadderly, for she had flung herself desperately forward. "And now, as a punishment for being so naughty, suppose——"

He did not complete the sentence, for the girl's hand, swinging round, smacked his face.

"You hell-cat!" gasped Chadderly, and put both arms around her.

With her back to the wall, she put up a desperate struggle, fighting like one whom fear and horror had driven mad. This leprous thing was worse than death. She had dared Vivanti, but this was soul-sickening !

Despite his bulk, the man was strong. She was in perfect condition, but he jeered at her attempts to escape. Now he had his arms about her and was drawing her face close to his . . .

In that moment of terrible dread, she thought of the man who in every way was the direct opposite of this beast.

“ Oh, Peter ! ” she moaned.

Chadderly laughed mockingly.

“ There’s no Peter likely to help you here, my beauty ! ” he said.

But in that he was wrong. Even while he spoke, the laughter died in his thick throat. A moment later his hands ceased their hold.

“ Oh, God ! ” sobbed Elsie Summers, in fervent thankfulness. She dropped to her knees, hands pressed to her eyes.

A miracle had been wrought to save her—but she could not look. All she knew was that a pair of hands, followed by two arms, and then a man’s body, had entered through

that open section of the prison wall, and that they had seized the neck of Chadderly from behind.

She looked up.

Yes, it was a miracle which had been wrought to save her! The man whose fingers were buried in the thick neck of the beast was—Peter Repington! He was now in the room.

She stood enthralled at this ferociously elemental struggle. Once Chadderly flung himself clear, but Repington sprang at him like a tiger again, and once again his hands closed on the fleshy throat that was mottled and discoloured.

The fight went on in a stillness that was awe-inspiring. Chadderly uttered little moans, but no sound came from his foe: Repington was using every fraction of his energy in trying to kill this human slug.

He had him now! The great arms of Chadderly were wildly beating the air, the feet were vainly endeavouring to retain some sort of a hold upon the floor. Relentlessly the neck was pressed back—back—

“ You’ll kill him! ” cried Elsie Summers.

“ I—mean—to! ” came tensely from Repington.

And then there was an ominous snap, a horrible sound that made the girl feel violently sick—and the great bulk of Chadderly sprawled helplessly on the floor.

"Dead?" whispered the girl.

"I hope so!" replied Peter Repington.

Womanlike, she thought of him rather than of herself.

"They will kill you!" she said. "Vivanti is here."

"And so are some very good pals of ours, old girl!" he told her, with a return of his usual manner. "You don't think I came here alone, do you? The place is surrounded—not one of the rats can escape!"

"Oh, my dear!" she said. "I—I—" And then she fell limp in his arms.

They were hastening home to London in Peter Repington's sports Delage.

"How did I get there?" repeated Repington. "I'll tell you. After hanging about the Gates of Rapture Cabaret till nearly one o'clock this morning, I took a taxi to your flat. Directly I read your note I guessed that they had snared you—"

"Yes. I had a 'phone message. I could have sworn it was poor Vania's voice. . . . When

I got to the place—it was a room in a house off the Hampstead Road—three men overpowered me. I was chloroformed. . . . Where was it they took me?"

"To a house in the marshes of the east coast. A man named Bayeur, who was a big pot in Vivanti's gang, knew where it was," he added, with grim significance. "As I say, directly I read your note I guessed that something was wrong. There was one chance, and that a slim one. But it worked. I rushed back to the Gates of Rapture hell, picking up a pal I could trust on the way. Here we found friend Bayeur. We worked a little confidence trick on him, and got him back to my rooms. There I put the fear of God into the swine, and, when he wouldn't say at once, I—well, I am afraid I became rather primitive. . . . A red-hot poker applied to the sole of the human foot is not pleasant, but it had the effect of making Bayeur loosen his tongue. . . .

"After that, it was a question of seeing how many miles an hour the Delage *could* cover—once I had sent a hurried 'phone message through to Scotland Yard."

"Poor Vania! This will be a lesson to her. Peter, what do you think they wanted with her?"

Repington frowned.

"Who can tell the uses that Paul Vivanti may not have for a beautiful woman—'the most beautiful woman in London'? " he replied. "Isn't an unscrupulous beautiful woman the most powerful weapon that any man of the underworld can possess? "

"But Vania wouldn't be unscrupulous."

"You may be certain," replied Repington seriously, "that it was Vivanti, through one of his satellites, who introduced Vania Dean to the drug habit. Once she was completely under the domination of those hellish lures, Vivanti would have her absolutely at his mercy—she would be his, body and soul. She would be forced to do whatever he willed."

Elsie Summers shuddered.

"If only that fiend himself had been caught!" she said.

Repington nodded.

"Yes," he replied slowly. "But once again we have robbed him of his victim. We must be thankful for that."

"**H**ANG it!" exclaimed Peter Repington.
 "That's a nuisance!"

"What's a nuisance?" enquired Elsie Summers.
Repington looked at her curiously.

"I don't know whether you would appreciate my distress," he replied; "but, since you are my secretary, from whom no secrets are hidden, I will explain. Freddie Williams has been taken to hospital with knee-trouble; it is feared that a cartilage may have slipped."

The singularly attractive girl to whom Repington had given this confidence smiled faintly.

"Who is Freddie Williams, may I ask, and what is his knee-trouble—sorry as I am, of course, for the poor man—to do with you?" she remarked.

Peter Repington rose from his chair and commenced to pace the room.

"Freddie Williams is the famous outside-right for the Ruddersburn football team," he said. "Under this new off-side rule, he is accomplishing wonders every week. Through his well-known trick of cutting in he has already scored fifteen goals this season. The fact that he is on the injured list, and will not be able to play against Milverton Wanderers on

Saturday, is a very serious matter for the club—and for me, incidentally."

"For you?" The girl's expression was mildly incredulous.

"For me," repeated Repington; "you see, I have already sent away my coupon in the *Sunday Special* £1,000 competition,¹ and have given Ruddersburn Town to win against the Wanderers. With Williams playing, that seemed a moral certainty; but without Williams, I'm very much afraid Ruddersburn will lose—or, at the most, only draw. It's most annoying."

Elsie Summers laughed.

"It certainly will be a pity if it means your losing the £1,000," she commented, before turning to her work.

A week later she tiptoed into the room.

"I fancy you will have to leave Ruddersburn Town out of your future football calculations," she told her employer. If a faint tinge of sarcasm coloured her voice, she could not help it; this passion for filling up football prediction coupons she had always regarded as being somewhat silly for a man of Peter Repington's intelligence.

"What is that you say?" asked Repington, absorbed in a cypher.

"Your pet team Ruddersburn Town would seem to be in a bad way," replied his secretary ; "there is a statement in this morning's papers to the effect that the club is going bankrupt ! "

"Bankrupt ! One of the finest sides in the Second Division of the League ! "

"I don't know anything about that, but here is the paragraph ; read it for yourself."

The astonishing statement proved to be true ; that well-known Second Division team, Ruddersburn Town, actually was on the brink of bankruptcy.

It was a piquant position to the outside world, but, to the loyal lovers of football in the small manufacturing town of the North, a tragical one.

A wealthy resident named Benjamin Russell had been the financial mainstay of the club for years. But now Russell had suddenly decided, with only seven days' warning, to call in the money which the club owed him. Faced with this sudden and totally unexpected crisis, the officials of Ruddersburn Town were at their wits' end to know what to do ; indeed, their only possible course seemed to be to sell up the team. The current value of the players they had on their staff would just about balance the £14,000 which the club owed its creditor.

In despair, but feeling that the public should be informed of the true position, the chairman of the club called a public meeting. Jack Hart, the centre-forward of the club, accompanied by Isobel Gunn, the innocent cause of all the trouble, was present, as well as the other playing members of the side.

The hall was crowded, many having to stand. Excitement ran high.

The rattling of a small wooden hammer on the table, placed well back from the edge of the platform, a slight outburst of cheering, and the chairman, whom the meeting was able to recognise as David Gerrity, chairman of directors of the Ruddersburn club, had risen to make his address.

In a slow but impressive manner he explained the reasons why that meeting had been called. It had been convened, he said, in the hope that, as a result of it, sufficient support would be forthcoming from the residents of the town to carry on a club which, judged by its performances during the season, might accurately be described as the most promising team of the country.

"Ruddersburn has always had the name of being a town of sportsmen," declared the speaker, warming to his subject. "Are you

going to lose that good name now ? The town is amply big enough to support both a first-class professional Rugby team and a first-class professional Association side.

“ I do not intend to mince words ; the plain, honest truth is that this town has not been fair to the Ruddersburn club up to now. We have a record which challenges comparison with that of any other team, not only in the Second Division of the League, but in the country. Many towns possessing our team would provide ‘ gates ’ at every home match of over thirty thousand. We don’t ask for crowds as big as that—at least, not for the present ; we merely want sufficient support to be allowed to carry on.

“ I notice that Mr. Benjamin Russell is amongst us to-night. I wish to take this opportunity of thanking our late patron publicly for the very generous support he has given to the Ruddersburn club in the past. As you know, Mr. Russell has decided to call his money in, and, as a business man, none of us on the board of directors of the Ruddersburn club blame him. We are satisfied, however, that Mr. Russell will not, if he carries out his intention, lose any money by reason of his past interest in the team.

“ But, gentlemen, if Mr. Russell calls his

money in, it will mean that the club will have to declare itself bankrupt and be disbanded—that is, unless we are definitely promised sufficient support during the next few days to counterbalance the money which Mr. Russell advanced to us, and which we are compelled to pay back to him at once."

"What is the amount?" asked a voice.

"The lowest possible figure which can save Ruddersburn is £15,000."

"Some hopes!" jeered a voice from the back of the hall.

"Chuck him out!" yelled an indignant supporter of the club.

It was the signal for pandemonium to break loose. The last speaker had allowed his indignation to get the better part of his discretion. A strong rowdy section—recruited, no doubt, by many dubious means—only wanted an excuse to endeavour to ruin the meeting.

This they nearly succeeded in doing. But, exercising admirable restraint, the chairman waited patiently until the storm had passed, warning his well-wishers not to add further fuel to the flames.

He had his reward. Finding that they were being ignored, the interrupters at length tired of their "sport."

"Thank you!" said the chairman quietly, when order had been secured. "I will now continue: I told you that the sum of £15,000 was urgently needed to save the Ruddersburn club from being disbanded. Now, the majority of men here know enough about football affairs to be aware that I am not appealing on behalf of myself or my fellow-directors. Even if it was not a well-known fact that the wealthiest of professional football clubs pay a very small dividend, the wretched attendances which we have had on the ground throughout the present season would be sufficient proof that the directors, one and all, are losing money instead of making it, so far as the Ruddersburn club is concerned.

"You may rightly say that that is purely our own affair. And you will be quite right; it is our own affair. And let me tell you this: whatever we have lost, or are going to lose, we shall not squeal about it! We are not donning mourning for that money.

"But, having shown our practical interest in the club, we naturally expect others to follow our example. The need is desperate, but if a hundred and fifty residents of this town will come forward and each will guarantee a sum of £100, Ruddersburn, of which I am more

proud at this moment than I have ever been, will be saved !

“ And ”—interrupting the outburst of cheering which this statement had elicited—“ let me add that this Ruddersburn club of ours is worth saving ! I have told you before that we have a brilliant team—look at the League table if you don’t believe me—and the men who wear the scarlet jersey of Ruddersburn are something more than brilliant—they are loyal ! What will you say, you who hooted and jeered just now, when I tell you that every man who is a member of the Ruddersburn first team has been approached to-day by representatives of one or more famous clubs ? Our players had a perfect right to sign for these clubs if they had liked, inasmuch as we had given them permission to do so ; but I am proud to say that every man has decided to remain loyal to Ruddersburn for so long as their present club may require them. I don’t know what you think of that, gentlemen, but I have only one word by which I can describe it. That word is ‘ magnificent ’ ! Moreover, I should say that the history of professional football cannot offer a parallel to it.”

“ Let’s have the names ! ” roared a voice.

“ Certainly,” replied the chairman. He

produced a paper that he had hitherto held concealed in his hand. "Wallis, the goalkeeper, was asked to-day to sign on for Clayton Athletic and three other clubs ; Bennett, the right-back, received offers from Midchester City and Wroughton Wanderers ; the Rangers and the Swifts wanted our left-back, Tranfield, but they couldn't get him.

"That splendid sportsman and footballer, Ben Warriner, our centre half-back, received no fewer than six offers from First Division clubs ! Before he put on our jersey it was thought that Warriner's football days were over ; instead of that, he is playing as well to-day as ever he did !

"Wrenlock and Nixon could both have gone to Wilsbrough United," continued the chairman. "The Albion wanted Dean badly, but Jimmy Dean is going to continue to play for Ruddersburn so long as there is a Ruddersburn. Finnegan, his partner at inside-right, might have gone to Clayton to play for the Athletic, or to Birlton to play for the Idlers. Our left wing, Lennie and Bell, could have had their choice of three First Division clubs——"

"And the centre-forward, Mr. Chairman ?" asked a voice from the balcony. "What about the centre-forward ?"

It was Ben Warriner, the centre-half and captain of the team, who had shouted the words so that they might be heard above the din. Mr. Gerrity acknowledged the omission with a nod and a smile.

"I must apologise for the omission," he said readily, "and will make what reparation is due to the brilliant young player who performed so well in his opening match last Saturday against the Wanderers. Hart, the centre in question, to-day received a pressing invitation to lead the attack of the justly famous Hampton Villa team! A greater honour than that no professional footballer can ever hope to receive!"

Up in the balcony, Hart felt a warm little hand touching his.

"Oh, Jack," whispered Isobel Gunn, "how simply splendid! Why didn't you tell me? I feel so proud of you!"

Showing obvious signs of emotion by this time, the chairman concluded his spirited address with the words:

"That, gentleman, is the team which all the rest of the country seems to want, but which up to now you have practically ignored. I hope with all my heart that, now it is in very real danger, you will want it too! It is a team of which any town in England might well be

proud ! And now I shall be pleased to hear the views of the meeting."

" I hope he's made them feel sorry, with that splendid speech !" said Isobel Gunn fervently.

" Look who is getting up !" The snapped words made the girl gaze first at her companion and then at the man at whom he was staring fixedly. It was Benjamin Russell !

Heaving himself to his feet, Russell looked round the sea of faces that confronted him. There was a disagreeable smile on his fat face.

" Most of you here know me," he said, " and those of you who don't know me personally have heard of my connection with the Rudders-burn club. It is because I have had association with this rotten business proposition—note carefully my words, gentlemen—that I feel it my duty to stand up at the first opportunity I have had and to warn those who think of becoming guarantors with £100 each not to have anything to do with it ! "

The words were like a bombshell exploding. Pandemonium broke out afresh.

" I call upon Mr. Russell to give a definite reason for that statement," cried the chairman.

" I can give you the reason, Mr. Chairman, better than Mr. Russell, for I shall tell the truth, and he would be afraid to do that ! "

The voice was that of a girl, and she was standing up. Her tones rang out clear and penetrating. Isobel Gunn was speaking !

" Mr. Russell has told you men," she said, calmly but challengingly, looking down at the crowded body of the hall, " what he says he considers was his duty. I am going to follow his example, if you will allow me to do so. I am only a girl, but I am one of the few persons inside this hall to-night who know the real reason why the Ruddersburn club is threatened with ruin. Would you like to hear that reason ? "

" We would, miss ! Good luck to you ! "

The cheering cries came up to her. They gave the speaker fresh confidence. A sidelong glance showed her the figure of Russell still standing and looking as though a ghost had suddenly risen up to accuse him.

" The Ruddersburn club is threatened with ruin because I refused to marry the man who was financing it ! That man, as you know, is Mr. Benjamin Russell ! "

" It's a lie ! " spluttered Russell, his voice scarcely rising above the babel of sound that immediately broke out.

" It's the truth—the truth ! " answered the girl in the balcony ; " and it is because it is

the truth that I find myself with the courage necessary to stand up before so many men and make the statement. Mr. Russell, after I had refused him, told me that he had only advanced the money to the Ruddersburn club because I was so interested in the team for which my brother occasionally played when he was in Ruddersburn. As I say, it was out of a spirit of meanness that Mr. Russell withdrew his money, although, of course, he had every right to do so. No one can object to that, but what I do object to is his trying to influence other people.

"As the chairman said just now," went on the well-bred and clear-ringing voice of the girl who was making such an amazing appeal, "this town has always been famous for its sporting traditions. Let us live up to those traditions now! It is with the greatest possible pleasure that I offer myself as the first £100 guarantor of the Ruddersburn Football Club, if the chairman will accept me!"

"My dear lady, let me assure you how much we appreciate this tremendous honour! We will accept you with the greatest possible pleasure, and be proud to do so."

David Gerrity had just received the shock of his life; but he was to receive yet another surprise.

A man who had been sitting at the back of the hall rose and held up his hand to quell the hubbub.

"Mr. Chairman——" he started.

But the crowd, not recognising the speaker, continued to cheer and to look in the direction of Miss Isobel Gunn.

"Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, if you wish your club to be saved, will you please give me a hearing?" now shouted the stranger. "I can and will save Ruddersburn Town from being wound up, but I must state my views."

The speaker proved to be a very fit-looking man of about forty, whose clear eye and ringing voice held the interest of everyone in the room.

"Mr. Chairman and gentlemen," he said, amidst a dead silence, "subject to your approval, I am prepared to save your club from the disgrace of becoming bankrupt and to set it upon its feet again. Moreover, I will promise you that before the end of the season Ruddersburn Town shall be the most talked-of club in the country."

A voice called :

"Who are you? What's your name?"

The stranger turned in the direction of the speaker.

"My name doesn't matter for the moment"

he said, " but I'm a millionaire. I can afford even such an expensive hobby as running a professional football team. Now, please listen to my terms. . . . "

It was beautiful football. After manœuvring for position, the Ruddersburn inside-right dribbled on a few yards, drew the left-half, and swept out to his winger. The outside-right, taking the ball in his stride, swerved past the plunging left-back, cut in, and delivered a rocket-ball which swept past the outstretched fingers of the visiting goalkeeper and entered the net at a terrific speed. The spectacular feat was greeted with a hurricane of applause.

Peter Repington turned to his neighbour.

" A wonderful goal ! " he said. His face was aglow with enthusiasm. The product of a Public School which considered that Rugby was the only game of football a sportsman with self-respect should play, he knew himself to be a heretic, but professional soccer at its best stirred him profoundly. He had made a break in his journey from the North especially to see Ruddersburn Town play that afternoon.

The man sitting on his right puffed hard at his pipe.

" Yes," he agreed, " Jimmy Dean is a good

lad. He'll be getting his international cap before long, will Jimmy."

The game proceeded. The home right-winger continued to be the star of the match. He was a strikingly handsome youth of twenty with a finely developed physique.

Ten minutes from time, when Ruddersburn Town were still leading by the finely-shot goal which Dean had scored, there was a cry from the crowd on the opposite side of the ground.

"That's Jimmy!" muttered Peter Repington's neighbour. "Broke his leg, I shouldn't wonder!"

Repington saw a crowd gathered round a prostrate Ruddersburn player. True enough, it proved to be the talented outside-right who was injured. After a little while the referee blew his whistle, and some ambulance men, who were in attendance, went running across the playing-pitch.

A couple of minutes later the outside-right, looking in great pain, was carried off the field.

"I don't suppose we shall be seein' *him* any more!" commented Peter Repington's loquacious neighbour.

"Let's hope he won't have to give up the game altogether," replied Repington; "it may

not be so bad as you think. Perhaps it's merely a strain ; his leg may not be broken."

The man looked sideways. Then he dropped his voice.

" Whenever one of our players gets carried off the field we never see him again ! " he said in a mysterious undertone.

Apart altogether from the strangeness of the remark, there was something in the man's voice which drew Repington's attention.

" Never see them again ? " he repeated.
" Why, what happens to them ? "

" Ah ! " replied the man ; " now you're askin' me somethin' ! The story is they goes to America."

" To play football for American clubs ? But that would mean breaking their agreements, surely ? " commented Repington.

" Ah ! " The man pursed his lips again. " Well, all I can say is that if Jimmy Dean does disappear, like Bert Finnegan and Joe Anders did, there'll be trouble ! That fellow Roger Gilbert will have to answer some awkward questions. It's all very well for him to say that the players have done a bunk to the States, but has anyone ever seen them go ? That's what I'm askin' you, mister."

Peter Repington was accustomed to meeting

peculiar situations, but he felt himself becoming excited as he asked : " What do you suggest happens to these players whom you say so mysteriously disappear ? "

The man moved closer.

" Look here, mister," he said, " I don't know who you are, but you appear to be a sensible sort of feller and a good judge of the game. That's good enough for me. Now I asks you, wasn't it a funny thing for a man no one knew anythin' about, a man who had no connection with the town, to come to Ruddersburn and offer to buy the town's professional football team ? "

" When I read about it, I must say I thought it was a very sporting action," replied the listener ; " for if this Mr. Gilbert hadn't come forward your club would have been disbanded ; isn't that so ? "

" I maintain that the directors shouldn't have handed over sole and supreme control to this stranger, whom no one knows anythin' about ! " went on the critic, ignoring the question. " What becomes of these players that, after being injured, are never seen again ? How do you know what this Gilbert does with them ? "

Peter Repington looked at the speaker. He was evidently very much in earnest.

" What could he do with them ? " he enquired.

But the other paid no attention. He was looking at a man standing up in the director's box.

" That's Gilbert," he said. " Can you say that you like the look of him?—because *I* don't ! "

Peter Repington looked in the direction indicated. Then a warm wave passed through his body.

He recognised the man at once.

It was Simon Haggerty, the multi-millionaire whom Paul Vivanti had changed from a decrepit human wreck into a vigorous man of middle age !

" It is true that a couple of players who used to be on the books of Ruddersburn Town have gone to try their luck in America," said the man who called himself Roger Gilbert, " but I doubt if Dean can be convinced that it will be a good step for him to take, Mr. — ? "

" Dennis," supplied the visitor. The latter, who wore large tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles, and spoke with a strong American accent, leaned forward. " You'll let me have a word with him, Mr. Gilbert, eh ? " he asked. " Say, that boy would set my home town, Philly, on fire when

he starts to run down the wing ! If it's a question of money—I understand that you own the club, Mr. Gilbert ? ”

“ Lock, stock, and barrel ! ” rejoined the other. “ Yes, you're right there ; everything connected with the Ruddersburn Town Football Club belongs to me ! Did you say you'd like to see young Dean, Mr. Dennis ? ”

“ I certainly should. Perhaps, after all, I can convince him that a trip over the water would be for his good. But where can the lad be found ? ”

“ *Here!* ” replied his host. “ That's the way I treat my players, Mr. Dennis ; when they get injured, instead of sending them to a public hospital, I have them brought to my own house. . . . But you said you'd like to see Dean. Well, you shall.”

He led the way out of the room. The hand of the man who followed him was on the revolver which he had placed in his pocket before making the call.

“ Step inside ! ” said Mr. Roger Gilbert cordially, throwing open a door.

Wary as the other was, he was not quick enough to avoid the attack which was instantly made upon him. Before he could draw his revolver, the visitor had his arms and legs

seized. There came a smashing blow on the head, knocking out sense and life. With a smothered groan the supposed American football scout crashed into oblivion.

" I bid you welcome, Mr. Peter Repington ! " said a mocking voice.

Peter Repington, just awakened from that forced swoon, looked up. But already his instinct told him that it was his arch-enemy, Paul Vivanti, who had spoken.

" You unspeakable swine ! " he cried, and bounded to his feet.

" Not so fast, my young friend ! " came the warning ; and, for the second time since he had put foot inside that accursed place, hands seized him and, despite all the efforts he made, he became powerless again.

Whilst he glared and fretted, Paul Vivanti, whom he could see clearly now, with his evil-glowing eyes, pouting red lips, and abnormally long-fingered hands, went to the wall of this long and raftered room, which might have formed a mediæval armoury, and took down a couple of rapiers. The blade of one of these he tested, bending it almost into a circle and smiling as the blue steel hummed back into position.

"Please allow Mr. Repington the use of his limbs," he ordered, and the men who had acted as jailers fell away. At a further sign from Vivanti, they left the room. The heavy door clanged behind them ; there came the sound of a well-oiled lock clicking, and then of a bolt rasping home.

"We are quite alone!" murmured Paul Vivanti—and smiled his devil's smile.

There was only one thing that kept Repington from rushing at him : Paul Vivanti held the long-bladed rapier guarding his slim body.

"My illustrious enemy," said Vivanti, "you once accused me of not being a sportsman, according to your English standard. To-night I hope to rectify that erroneous impression. You wish to kill me ; very well, you shall be given the opportunity. We will fight a duel, my friend Repington, you and I. Have I not heard it said that fencing is one of your hobbies ?

"I regret," the suave, slightly mocking voice went on, "that you should have been somewhat roughly handled just now ; believe me, it was an unfortunate necessity. But on the table over there you will find food and drink—you are at liberty to refresh yourself. No, let me assure you, neither is poisoned. When I kill you, my enemy, I shall kill cleanly—with this!" He

sent the blade of the rapier he held whistling through the air.

This was the most fantastic moment he had ever experienced, but Peter Repington moved forward. He would risk a drink of that wine ; it would put new life into him ; and, by God ! after that . . .

"Thank you, Vivanti," he said, as he raised the glass of wine. "You're a sportsman—of a sort !"

The child-like body of the world's most dangerous criminal bowed.

"You are very kind ; and now, won't you sit down ? Not only do I want you to have your full strength when we cross blades, but there is a little mystery the solution of which no doubt you will be interested to hear."

"You also are very kind, Vivanti," commented his hearer.

The mocking voice went on :

"This room, which, within a few minutes, will see the end of the feud that you have waged against me for so long, used to be—what you say in English ?—a *salle d'armes*. It goes back to the Middle Ages—the period of chivalry ; one of us will die in the atmosphere of honour, you see, my dear Repington !

"It belongs to my friend, Simon Haggerty.

Did you recognise in the football benefactor, Roger Gilbert, the multi-millionaire whom——”

“ For whose sake you killed the brother of Elsie Summers ? Yes, I recognised him ! I was at the football match this afternoon. It was there I heard some curious rumours—rumours dealing with the mysterious disappearance of injured footballers. They have been said to go to America . . . but I know they didn’t go to America, Vivanti ! ”

The other smiled.

“ No, they didn’t go to America . . . but it was rather a plausible tale,” he replied. “ And now, since you know so much which is incriminating—here is your weapon ! ” Paul Vivanti extended the handle of the second rapier.

Repington seized it eagerly.

“ You will remove your coat ? ” enquired the other politely. “ No, do not fear ; I shall not attack you while you are so engaged.”

Peter Repington bowed.

“ I will remove my coat,” he said ; and did so.

Then he faced his foe, the blade of his weapon extended towards the man he meant to kill.

“ After the third pass I shall run you through ! ” hissed Paul Vivanti. The whole demeanour of the man had changed. The courtesy he had briefly shown dropped from

him like a cloak for which he had no further use.

His evil eyes glowing, he pressed forward. . . .

Peter Repington knew he was looking at Death. This man was a master of fence ; he used a rapier as cunningly as a paid assassin of a bygone age. His own fencing had been merely a polite exercise, a means to keep himself fit. He hadn't a chance ; any second now . . .

Then, when the blue steel of Paul Vivanti's blade was seeking for the right spot so that it might kill, the door was flung open and a man rushed in.

It was Simon Haggerty.

"Vivanti!" he called. "There's hell to pay ! Come—quickly ! "

Peter Repington frowned as he accepted a cigar from Sir Herbert Mandeville's case.

"My dear uncle," he said, in a tone of the deepest chagrin, "I'm getting beyond my job ; I shall have to resign from the department ! "

The Secretary of the National Security Department tried to look serious.

"Really?" he commented, in a polite tone.

"Yes," went on his nephew. "I've lost my grip. I have already told you that I could have run Vivanti through in the moment when he

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was taken off his guard by Simon Haggerty suddenly appearing. I had the blade ready . . . and then I couldn't do it. You see, he had proved himself a sportsman—of a sort—just previously."

Sir Herbert Mandeville knocked the ash off his cigar.

" What rather annoyed me," he said, " was your going away to the North of England without leaving any word. If it had not been for Miss Summers, I shouldn't have had the slightest inkling of your whereabouts."

Repington frowned.

" Of course, if I had known that Scotland Yard was already on the track of Simon Haggerty over those disappearing professional footballers—we can guess the use Paul Vivanti made of them ; no doubt he is still endeavouring to rejuvenate elderly *roués*—I could have done a little co-operating. Anyway, it was jolly lucky for me that they arrived at that beastly castle place just when they did. Another minute and Vivanti would have skewered me ! "

" Let us hope," said Sir Herbert Mandeville, rising, " that the next time you will not have quite so many scruples, and that consequently you will be able to skewer Vivanti. We have his

associate, Simon Haggerty—that's one blessing. Haggerty won't be able to finance Vivanti's damnable schemes any longer. But I'm tired of talking shop. Come and play billiards."

CHAPTER IX THE MAN WITH THE MISSING MOLE

PETER REPINGTON chuckled.

"We're getting on in the world," he said ; "I hope you have a really stunning frock ready to hand"—turning to Elsie Summers, his assistant—"because to-morrow night you will need it."

Elsie Summers expressed no astonishment.

"As it happens, I've recently paid a visit to Héloïse," she replied ; "it is blue and gold, and I do not think you will need to be ashamed of me. But why all this excitement ? "

Repington passed over the ornate and impressive card of invitation which he had been studying with so much amusement.

"His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of Caronia, requests the pleasure of my company, 'with friend,' you will notice. Will you be my 'friend,' Elsie——?"

"How absurd you are this morning, Mr. Repington ! "

" 'Mr. Repington' ! Last night, when I wished you farewell on your doorstep, it was 'Peter.' "

" That was not at the office. I insist upon calling you 'Mr. Repington' during office hours, as you must call me 'Miss Summers.' Business discipline must be maintained."

She looked more than usually charming, and Repington had a difficulty in restraining himself from rushing forward and taking her in his arms.

A month had passed since their last brush with Dr. Paul Vivanti, the master criminal, who had come to be known as the Worst Man in the World ; and life had become tame in consequence. After all, as Peter Repington was bound to admit, there was a zest in existence when you did not know if that particular day was destined to be your last on earth. That Vivanti had not disappeared from London, that he was merely lying low waiting for another opportunity to wreak his vengeance upon those who sought to circumvent his hellish schemes, Repington knew quite well; he had fought too many rounds with this perverted genius to have any other opinion. The question was : in which fresh, ingenious direction would Vivanti next show his hand ? Time alone could supply

an answer to that query, however ; and, in the meantime, what was wrong with their enjoying themselves ?

Elsie Summers, who had been studying the impressive card of invitation to the dinner given by the latest sprig of mid-European royalty, H.R.H. the Crown Prince of Caronia, to visit London, looked thoughtful. " Why should this man wish you to go to his dinner ? " she asked. " Have you ever met him before ? Was he at Oxford with you ? "

" No, I have always understood that he went into residence at the Other Place. But, my dear—forgive me, I forgot we were still in the office !—minor royalties ' ain't what they was.' And, after all, with a person of my resounding fame, it's quite likely that the Prince wishes me to entertain him with a few after-dinner stories. Have you heard that one about the Frenchman and the—— ? "

" You surely forget—— ! " rejoined the girl severely.

Repington laughed apologetically.

" I wasn't thinking what I was saying," he confessed ; " I couldn't have told you that one, in any case. . . . Hello, the 'phone."

Before he could spring up from the almost horizontal position in which he had been conducting

the above spirited conversation, his assistant had gone to the instrument.

"Hello . . . hello . . . hello. . . . Yes, Sir Herbert . . . yes, I'll tell him."

"Sir Herbert Mandeville," she announced.

Lazily, Repington took the receiver.

"Hello, uncle, old thing, how're tricks ? Yes, I got it by the post this morning. What ? But what's the idea ? Why, the whole bloomin' force will be there ! . . . Righto ! . . . Shall I bring Elsie ? You know, uncle, she won't let me call her 'Elsie' in the office ; it must be 'Miss Summers.' Necessary for office discipline and all that sort of thing, y'know, she says. Isn't it absurd ? . . . Oh, of course, she's a dear child ; a sweet, awfully dear child. . . . 'Bye."

He replaced the receiver, to smile into the flushing face of his assistant.

"Because you won't let me make love to you in the office—when you always look so provokingly nice—I must relieve my tortured feelings on the telephone," he explained. "But, seriously——"

"It is time you became serious," she admonished.

"Quite. But now I'm going to be frightfully serious ; most awfully serious, really. We've had an invitation to dine."

"Another?"

"Yes, but this last is quite a small affair —*au famille*, you know—just you and I and Sir Herbert. *Mon oncle* woke up in a hospitable mood, apparently; it would be churlish to throw his food back into his face. Sure you have nothing better to do? You see, I accepte, before asking you."

"I shall enjoy talking to Sir Herbert. He is such a sensible person."

"Touché! Well, he is certainly that. And he generally has something interesting to talk about. For instance, he has just told me that not only he, but Sir Bernard Bannister, have received invitations for this 'do' on Wednesday night."

"The Crown Prince of Caronia's reception?" questioned Elsie Summers, with puckered brow. "You may think me foolish, but I cannot help feeling that there is something peculiar about this invitation." She tapped the card with the tips of her fingers.

Repington looked at her intently. He had a deep respect for the intuition of his assistant. At least twice it had been the means of saving his life.

"Peculiar?" he repeated. "Why?"

"I don't quite know why," was the answer;

" at least, I can give you no adequate reason. I only know that I *feel* it is peculiar."

Repington instantly sobered.

" It's because you have been sticking to work too closely," he said ; " what you want is a frolic. I see there's a dance to follow the dinner. How many are you going to keep for me ? "

Although he had such a deep respect for the girl's intuition, he felt in this present case that her feeling of unrest was entirely due to her being a little below par. He had noticed it directly she showed up at the office that morning ; that was why he had purposely played the fool a bit : he wanted to cheer her up. She had got a trifle nervy through want of excitement. He had remarked on that fact before. In a moment of peril, Elsie Summers was the coolest person, without exception, that he had ever met. It was during the periods of waiting for their arch-enemy, Paul Vivanti, to show his hand again, that she was apt to lose her confidence and wonderful *élan*. He put down her present feeling to this cause.

After shrugging her shoulders, as though determined to rid them of an unwelcome load, Elsie Summers responded.

" Business before pleasure," she said, seating

herself at the typewriter. " Any letters ? Do you know it's nearly half-past ten o'clock, and that you haven't done a stroke of work yet ? "

" Loud cheers ! " responded Repington.

When the occasion demanded it, Peter Repington believed in doing things in style. For instance, this evening, it being an occasion of some note, he had kept his Delage sports two-seater in the garage and had engaged a Rolls limousine, whose chauffeur's uniform matched the plum-coloured car.

Certainly he had no cause to be disappointed with the appearance of his companion ; the blue and gold evening dress which Héloïse had provided was in excellent taste, enhancing Elsie Summers's flower-like beauty.

" Lucky me," murmured Repington, " to have the prettiest woman in London all to myself ! " He raised her right hand and kissed the tiny morsel of scented palm which the long white glove left visible.

Elsie smiled.

" You can be quite charming on occasion, Peter," she admitted. She would have liked to say a great deal more ; but she remembered the solemn and binding compact which had

been made between them, and sighed. For once, a sigh gave the man who heard it the most wonderful pleasure ; Peter guessed at the cause which had prompted it.

He became characteristically light-hearted.

"A word of praise from you, dear thing, is equal to a bushel of compliments from anyone else. So let us forget our trials and troubles and make merry while we have the chance. There is only one thing worrying me——"

"And that ? "

"That our princely host may so far forget his Balkan manners as to make open love to you."

"Is he—that kind of man ? "

"I am afraid so. If he does, I am rather inclined to think the harmony of the evening will be upset, for I shall certainly hand him a good stiff one on the jaw ! When this particular piece of worthlessness droops over your hand, Elsie, I shall be near by."

"I have been doing a little research work myself," replied the girl ; "it was because I had heard a good deal about the Prince's real character that I wondered why you accepted this invitation to-night."

Repington was ready with a reply.

"In the first place, my interest was intrigued.

In the second place, my self-esteem was somewhat agreeably flattered. Then, when I heard that Sir Herbert Mandeville, chief of a rather important branch of the Home Secret Service, as well as Sir Bernard Bannister, the most important man at Scotland Yard, not only in actual position, but in his own estimation, had also been invited, I decided that you and I certainly could not afford to miss this agreeable assembly. . . . Why, what were you going to say, Elsie ? ”

“ Er—nothing,” replied Elsie Summers.

It was a white lie.

The spacious and regal Biltmore Rooms, famous not only in London itself, but all over the world, were a scene of brilliant gaiety when, with Elsie Summers on his arm, Peter Repington entered them a few minutes later.

“ His Royal Disgracefulness certainly seems intent on doing the thing well,” he commented, and his companion, whose face he noticed had become somewhat rigid, nodded.

They were greeted by an equerry, who conducted them to their host, the Crown Prince. The stories—most of them scandalous, and all of them highly flavoured—which had gathered

round this man of thirty-six, received some corroboration in the features of Carlos of Caronia. It was the face of a thoroughly vicious person. Yet the manners of H.R.H. were graceful and finished ; he bowed like a courtier over the hand of Elsie Summers before raising it to his lips. Peter Repington felt like kicking him, and then endeavoured to direct his thoughts by studying the members of the Prince's entourage. They were all foreigners, but, beyond the fact that their faces were poor recommendations to their personal characters, he could find nothing particularly suspicious in their appearance. Suspicious ! He called himself a fool for entertaining the word. What could possibly happen in a social gathering held in the most famous *rendezvous* of its type in the Metropolis, and attended by some of the most influential men in the country ? He dismissed the thought ; until now he had never seriously harboured it ; had he done so, he certainly would not have asked the girl he loved to accompany him.

The next moment he himself was being greeted by His Royal Highness.

" Mr. Repington. . . . I have heard of you from many people," remarked the Prince graciously. " I am told that you are the most successful tracker of criminals in England. Is that so ? "

"I wouldn't go so far as that," replied Repington. "Officially speaking, I am not a professional detective at all; I'm merely an amateur."

The Crown Prince laughed as at a good joke.

"An amateur who teaches all the best professionals the elements of their business—is it not so? Well, I shall have the pleasure of renewing this conversation with you later, I hope, Mr. Repington." He turned to greet the next in the thick stream of guests.

Peter turned away with a smile. He never had had much use for the idle cumberers of the earth, and this particular specimen had appealed to him very unfavourably, in spite of the compliments received.

Shortly afterwards he met Sir Herbert Mandeville and Sir Bernard Bannister. Neither appeared overwhelmingly pleased at being present, but explained that unofficial pressure had been brought to bear for their attendance. Apparently the State of Caronia had a passing interest at the moment for His Majesty's Government.

"But what kind of function is it?" demanded the head of Scotland Yard. "Is it just an ordinary dinner, or what?"

After a brief fanfare of verbal trumpets on the

part of the Prince's aide-de-camp, who, in the words of Repington, "wore positively the most gorgeous uniform I personally have ever seen outside a circus," His Royal Highness made an interesting announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "on the eve of my visit to London, which will last, I hope, a considerable time, I have ventured to invite some of the most interesting personalities at present living in the most wonderful country in the world—need I say that I refer to England?—to meet each other. It gives me the most exquisite pleasure, let me assure you, one and all, to preside over such a gathering. Ladies—gentlemen—I bid you most hearty welcome!" The Crown Prince of Caronia bowed from the waist.

"Effusive blighter!" growled Sir Bernard Bannister. "I hope he hasn't poisoned the champagne; this reminds me somehow of that picture thingummy-taking supper with the Borgias, or whatever it's called."

"Don't be so pessimistic, sir," laughed Repington. "Anyone would think that it was Paul Vivanti, and not the Crown Prince of Caronia, who had invited you to dine."

"Vivanti! Good God, boy, don't ruin my digestion before I start eating! I've been doing

my best to forget that Eastcliff episode, but haven't quite succeeded. I'm hoping that infernal scoundrel's dead!"

"No harm in hoping, sir," replied the younger man—and then the waiters brought the fish.

The food had been excellently cooked, the wines admirably chosen. From an adjacent ballroom came the sound of a fox-trot played in a most exhilarating fashion.

"Peter, dear," whispered Elsie Summers, "I have had the most wonderful time—been made love to all through dinner by the Prince! I shall just have time to give you this first dance before he carries out his threat—and claims me for the rest of the evening!"

"Confound his impudence!" He noticed how excited the girl had become, and wondered at the cause. This was the Elsie Summers he knew when faced with a great danger. She was strung up, audacious, brilliantly attractive and provocative.... Yet...danger! What danger could there be?

"I'll snatch at my happiness while I may, then," he commented, falling in with her mood. His companion gaily laughed.

Peter danced so well that Elsie Summers congratulated him.

"I think I shall have to marry you, after all, Peter," she said; "it would be a shame to allow any other woman to annex such a thoroughly nice man."

Repington regarded her steadily.

"I warn you not to joke about a serious subject," he told her. "I see there are sitting-out rooms here, and I am just in the mood to play Romeo rather rampantly."

A man approached.

"May I have the pleasure of dancing with the most attractive lady present to-night?" asked H.R.H. Carlos of Caronia, in a suave tone that yet held a trace of mockery.

"I have been waiting for you to ask me, Prince." Elsie Summers smiled up into the heavy, gross face.

Peter Repington stared. He could not understand. What was the matter with Elsie to-night? One moment she had appeared depressed and apprehensive; an hour later she was all laughing gaiety. During this time she had been graciousness itself—yet now she was giving this bounder, whose reputation with women was a byword even in London, every encouragement!

He bowed stiffly as the girl, putting her hand on the Crown Prince's arm, turned without another word.

There were many attractive women at the Biltmore Rooms that night, and they all had a smile for the very interesting-looking young man who, it was whispered, had such an exciting existence. But Peter Repington was in a black mood ; his thoughts were centred on one woman only—and she had disappeared ; although he searched the whole suite of rooms, he could not see Elsie Summers.

At the end of his search he frowned. Surely nothing could have happened to her ? She was quick-witted, and she knew the character of Carlos of Caronia.

Time passed—on leaden feet, it seemed to Repington—and still he could not find Elsie. Then, in the middle of a lilting two-step, an amazing thing happened.

Without any warning, the huge ballroom was plunged into pitch darkness.

Immediately—so quickly that Peter decided the occurrence must have been foreseen, if not actually planned—a voice, loud and compelling, rang out, stilling the confusion.

“ Everyone must remain quite still, please ! ”

At least one hearer stiffened to attention at the words. What was this—a hold-up ? In the heart of London, with the chiefs of Scotland Yard and of an important branch of the Secret

Service present? It seemed impossible, incredible, and yet——

He had started to move forward, with the intention of getting closer to the owner of the voice that had issued the command, when he felt both his hands seized. He struggled violently, but, working with a thoroughness that was all the more sinister because it was silent, his mysterious foes overwhelmed him after a fierce fight; and the last recollection Repington had was feeling a vilely-smelling cloth placed over his mouth and nostrils.

Then nothing but a black void. . . .

He awoke to find himself lying trussed on something which he imagined at first must be a kind of hospital bed. One on his right, and the other on his left, he saw two men in exactly the same position. In the man on his right he recognised his uncle, Sir Herbert Mandeville, and therefore it was no surprise to discover that the third captive was Sir Bernard Bannister, C.M.G., the Chief Commissioneer of Scotland Yard.

"What the devil does all this mean?" exploded Bannister, when he caught Repington's eye.

"It means presumably, sir, that——"

"May I be permitted to make my own

explanation ? ” broke in a mocking voice. The next moment Peter Repington, indifferent to every ordinary danger, felt a cold perspiration break out on his body. Regarding him with a baleful gleam in his evil eyes was a man whose slightly-built frame was surmounted by a huge and remarkable head—his arch-enemy, Dr. Paul Vivanti !

It was Sir Bernard Bannister who broke the tense silence which followed.

“ You realise that the whole police force of this country are by this time searching for us ? ” he asked.

Vivanti snapped the abnormally long, white fingers of his right hand.

“ They may search—but they will not find,” came the caustic comment. “ Do you think I have not made better plans than that ?

“ It may interest you to know where you are,” the speaker continued. “ For the sake of my profession, and in the interests of medical research generally, I have recently bought a small mental home. It is in a very lonely part of the country— actually where does not matter. In any case”—with a smile which chilled the blood of at least two of his hearers—“ you will not be interested in such a matter very much longer—and I am practically certain of receiving

no interruption. Locally, this house is avoided on account of the unpleasant atmosphere with which it is surrounded, and as for your fools of police"—looking at Sir Bernard Bannister—"believe me, I have left nothing by which I might be traced. Once before, Bannister, I contrived to get you into my power—please forgive the melodramatic turn of the phrase—but then you managed to escape. I have made certain that you will not be so fortunate on the present occasion. The measures I have taken to prevent such an occurrence are somewhat ingenious, but I will not waste time by describing them now. Yet I can promise that they are effective."

"You are running a grave risk—whatever your intentions may be with regard to us."

Vivanti wheeled on his slender feet.

"Surely it is my old friend, Sir Herbert Mandeville speaking?" he declared. "Do not try to cause me mental distress by talking of risks, my dear Sir Herbert. I do not want the pleasure I am experiencing at the present time to be weakened in any way. Besides, haven't I already said that there is practically no risk—from my point of view?"

"Talk like a man," roared Sir Bernard Bannister, "and not like a mincing mummer! What do you intend to do with us?"

Paul Vivanti's red lips parted, showing pointed teeth.

"I regret that I cannot satisfy your full, if natural, curiosity," he replied ; "but this I will say : Before the morning you all three will be dead ! "

With that he left the room.

Directly the door was closed, the Chief of Scotland Yard turned as much of his face as was possible in Peter Repington's direction.

"Why the devil don't you say something ? " he snapped.

The Secret Service man allowed the ire of his distinguished associate to pass over his head.

"The time for talking would seem to have gone by," he remarked ; "the fact to remember is that we are here, three quite helpless men whom that fiend proposes coolly to murder before much more time has elapsed. From what we know of him, he is perfectly capable of doing it. What is more, there is no doubt he intends to do it ! "

"What happened to Miss Summers to-night ? " enquired Sir Herbert Mandeville. "She seems to have been the only one of us possessing any wits. I had noticed for some time before those lights went out that she was missing. Where did she go, Peter ? "

"I don't know," replied the younger man, instantly serious ; "all I know is that that precious swine, the Crown Prince Carlos, who must have been hand in hand with Vivanti over this business—although, for the love of Mike, I can't see yet what connection there can be between the two—came to claim Miss Summers for a dance, and that she did not come back. The knowledge doesn't exactly aid calm reflection on my part."

"She's a very sensible woman, Miss Summers," broke in Sir Bernard Bannister ; "in that affair at Eastcliff, some time ago, she showed quite remarkable acumen."

"That's a darned sight more than you did," replied Repington, with some heat.

"Young man——" started Bannister, when the opening of a door made the rest of the sentence die on his lips.

Paul Vivanti had re-entered the room. He was wearing a surgeon's white smock.

"I have returned to inform you, my friends, exactly how I intend you shall die !" he said quietly.

When His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince Carlos of Caronia, proposed to Elsie Summers that they should take a short ride through the

Park in his car, Peter Repington's charming assistant did a surprising thing : she consented. What was more, she raised no objection to H.R.H. holding her hand as they sped swiftly through the darkness. The heir to the Caronian throne was so absorbed by his companion that he did not notice which direction the driver was taking until the car suddenly stopped.

"What——?" he said, when he stopped to stare in sheer amazement. The girl, whose hand he had been caressing a few moments before, was now menacing him with a revolver, which she evidently knew how to use.

Before the astonished man had a chance to recover from his surprise, the door of the car opened. A scarf was thrown round his face ; this was drawn tightly by his unseen assailant, and, with equally remarkable quickness, the distinguished visitor's wrists and ankles were bound. Not a word was exchanged between Elsie Summers and the chauffeur, who had performed these functions almost beneath the eyes of an unsuspecting Hyde Park policeman.

Not many minutes later the prisoner, his ankles freed, was led into a small flat at the back of Oxford Street.

When the gag was removed, he, naturally enough, glared at his assailants.

"I'll have you both put in prison for this!" he cried. "Who are you?" he went on, staring at the man in chauffeur's uniform.

Elsie Summers ignored the question.

"I think I am the person to be asking questions," she said. "*What is going to happen at the Biltmore Rooms to-night?* Be quick, because I want to get back there—and *I want to be in time!*"

The man laughed.

"You must be mad, my dear young lady," he said. "I pray you to stop this ridiculous nonsense before I become seriously annoyed."

The girl did not pretend to hear anything he had said.

"I am on the telephone here—and I know the private number of Scotland Yard," she said. "If that should fail, I will leave you alone with Jenkins. Jenkins, I should explain, has been inside a Bolshevik prison—he was for a time in the well-known Lubjanka, the detention-place of the Tcheka. He learned a little about torturing there. . . . I hate to have to say this, but, you see, I am determined to make you speak."

"Who are you?" cried the prisoner in a changed voice.

"I belong to the British Home Secret Service," was the answer.

Dr. Paul Vivanti dropped the surgeon's knife which he had been examining. He looked up. There appeared to be a scuffle going on outside that room of unimagined terror.

The next minute the door burst open and a number of people poured into the room. At their head was a girl—and, at sight of her, Peter Repington's nerve, resolute enough until now, snapped.

Oh, he cried. "Thank God!"

There was a revolver shot, and Vivanti staggered. Then the floor gave beneath his feet, and immediately he disappeared from view.

Ten minutes later the searchers returned disconsolate. Once again Vivanti had escaped from the law which was devoting all its energies to his capture.

But Peter Repington forgot his disappointment. As for Elsie Summers, she placed both arms round the neck of the man who so narrowly had escaped a dreadful death, and kissed him frankly on the lips.

"Thank God! I was in time!" she said.
"What was he going to do with you?"

Peter Repington faintly smiled.

"He promised something interesting in the way of operations—but we needn't go into that. Sir Bernard Bannister has been throwing you

bouquets for the past hour—now let me know exactly how you have justified them. How did you get here ? ”

“ I persuaded H.R.H. the Crown Prince of Caronia to tell me,” was the answer ; “ that was why, when he started to make love to me, and asked me to go for a drive in the Park——”

“ So that was where you were.”

“ Yes. We had quite an exciting time in the Park. Jenkins——”

“ What was Jenkins doing there ? ”

She reprimanded him with a glance.

“ Please let me tell the story in my own way. From the first I had a suspicion that there was something funny about this invitation. I didn’t want to appear a fool, but at the same time I took certain precautions. For one thing, I arranged with the garage people that Jenkins should take the place of the ordinary chauffeur driving the Rolls. When we came out of the ballroom, the Prince was so busy looking at me that he didn’t notice Jenkins had been substituted for his own chauffeur.”

“ Good Lord ! But I didn’t recognise Jenkins myself ! ” exclaimed Repington.

“ Of course you didn’t ! He was disguised. Besides, you didn’t look at him long enough.”

"Come to that," said Peter, in a tone of self-defence, "I've only seen Jenkins twice before in my life. As a matter of fact, he hasn't been working for the department more than a month, so there's some excuse for me. But you make my flesh go all goosey with excitement! Say on, my lass!"

Elsie—now that she had saved the situation—rippled with laughter.

"Well, when we got the crook—for that's what he was, of course—out into the Park, I showed him the business end of a revolver, while Jenkins tied him up. We got him to my flat, and tried to make him talk. What I wanted to know, of course, was (1) what was due to happen at the Biltmore Rooms to-night, and (2) who was at the back of the affair.

"The man was obstinate at first—naturally he was nearly off his head with rage—but Jenkins was successful with him after applying a little pressure——"

"You bloodthirsty creature!" commented Repington, while a gasp came from Sir Bernard Bannister, who had been an attentive listener from the beginning.

"Unfortunately," continued the girl, "I was too late to prevent the hold-up at the Biltmore Rooms, but Jenkins had taken advantage of his

opportunity and had obtained friend Vivanti's new private address. So we hopped along in the Rolls, after collecting a few men from Scotland Yard. By the way, Vivanti must have got away with quite a lot of jewellery to-night as a side-line. Of course, the root of the scheme was to capture you three men and put you all quietly but expeditiously out of the way, but, while some of the gang were seeing to you, others were busy relieving the other guests of money and jewels. Friend Carruthers was loquacious enough to tell me that, too."

"Carruthers! Who in the deuce is Carruthers?" asked Repington.

Elsie Summers permitted herself a brief smile.

"The gentleman you believed was H.R.H. the Crown Prince Carlos of Caronia!" she said. "He was merely posing for the part to-night. Vivanti wanted a notability to give his party 'tone.' As a matter of fact, Carlos of Caronia, I understand from Carruthers, is living *incognito* in Paris at the present time with a lady whom—well, they are not married yet."

"Jumping cats!" cried Repington. "But how on earth did you discover that it wasn't the real Prince?"

Elsie Summers turned to Sir Herbert Mandeville.

"Do you remember telling me at dinner last night, Sir Herbert, that the most conspicuous feature of the Prince's face was the large mole on the left cheek?"

"Yes, certainly," said Mandeville.

"Well, when the mole he had on his left cheek came off in this man's hand whilst dancing with me to-night, I guessed that something was wrong! It was after that that I commenced to get busy."

"On your own," complained Peter Repington.

"It was essentially a woman's job," was the comment. "He couldn't have made love to *you*—stupid!"

CHAPTER X

THE CASE OF THE SINISTER PHILANTHROPIST

THIS sounds rummy. Listen!" said Peter Repington. He read out:

"Philanthropist is willing to render financial assistance to a few genuine young men who are really down-and-out. Must be healthy.—Box 01742B, *The Morning Age*."

Elsie Summers turned in her chair.

"Well?" she commented.

Repington laid down the newspaper with a mock impatient gesture.

"Sometimes you are incorrigible ! Here am I, scanning the morning Press for your entertainment and delight, and all you can do is to stare blankly and say, ' Well ? ' "

"I was waiting for you to make some comment yourself on that advertisement," was the calm reply. "By the way——" The telephone bell ringing cut short the rest of her remarks.

"It's Sir Bernard Bannister of Scotland Yard," she announced.

Peter became disrespectful.

"The old fool !" he whispered bitterly.
"What's he worrying about now ? "

"He said he wished to speak to you personally. Good job I put my hand over the mouth-piece or he would have heard what you called him. It must be something important, or he would have taken time to pass me a few compliments—as usual."

Peter groaned as he picked up the receiver.

"Hello, hello, hello ! Top o' th' mornin' and all that sort of thing ! What's agitating the old cerebellum so early in the day ? "

Elsie Summers noticed that the young man's face became more serious as he listened ; and,

when he finally replaced the receiver, Repington looked even stern.

"What do you think it was?" he asked, with an unexpected suggestion of anger in his tone.

"How can I tell?" She paused. "Anything to do with that advertisement in the *Age* which you've just read out?"

He leaned forward and put his hand on her shoulder.

"You really are the most amazing creature, Elsie——"

"'Miss Summers' in business hours, if you please."

"Never mind that now! I was saying, when you so rudely interrupted me, that you are the most amazing creature. Why did you ask that?"

"What?"

"If it was anything about that advertisement I've just read out? Why did you say that?"

"Something just flashed into my mind—that was all."

"Flashed into your mind?"

"Yes. I couldn't help thinking that the last three words of that advertisement had a peculiar sound."

"What were the last few words? I forgot for the moment."

The girl reached over, picked up the world-famous newspaper, found the advertisement on the front page, and read : "Philanthropist is willing to render financial assistance to a few genuine young men who are really down-and-out. Must be healthy——"

She paused, and repeated the last few words : "'Must be healthy.' Why should this philanthropist, whoever he is, have stipulated that ? Surely it's the sick and suffering who require his aid more than the robustly strong ? "

Repington nodded.

"In the ordinary way, yes," he agreed. "There's something else you were going to say ? "

"There is," his assistant replied ; "it's going back a good many years, I know, but have you forgotten that the 'Agony' columns of the *Age* and other national papers were used by spies during the war to communicate with each other ? "

Instead of laughing in good-humoured derision, as she had expected, Repington leaned across.

"It's very singular you should say that," he remarked. "Of course, I don't suppose for a moment that the two things have the slightest connection——"

"What two things?" asked his assistant.

"The remark you have just made and the request of Sir Bernard Bannister, Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard, that we should lend a hand in the Surrey murders."

Elsie Summers lit a cigarette.

"I have been away in Paris for a fortnight's well-deserved holiday, I would have you remember. I have seen no newspapers. Tell me about the Surrey murders."

"Two men's bodies have recently been found, both on the outskirts of remote Surrey hamlets," Repington said. "I will not go into unpleasant details, but the killing was evidently done by a homicidal maniac. No clues have been discovered by the local police, who have called in the assistance of Scotland Yard. In turn, Scotland Yard—but I am too modest to say anything more on that point. Obviously, however, something must be done to stop this epidemic of repulsive murders. I had to promise Bannister that I would take a trip into Surrey as soon as I was free. But let us return to this advertisement. Do you think that it was inserted by a spy?"

"The day for spies is somewhat past; but I think it possible that it is the work of some crook——"

"Vivanti?" asked Peter Repington, so suddenly that his companion started.

Elsie Summers smiled, as though in appreciation of her employer's quickness.

"Possibly," she conceded, regaining her composure; "what we have to remember is that, until he is captured and taken to the gallows, that man is always spinning a fresh web of evil."

"'A fresh web of evil' is good," smiled Repington; "and, as you suggest, nothing is too fantastic to be true in the case of Vivanti. I propose to write to Box 01742B at the *Morning Age* office."

Fifteen minutes later the thing was done. Giving an address in the Limehouse Causeway, "Arthur Gray, twenty-seven," said that, since leaving prison for a crime which he did not commit, he had not been able to get any job which had lasted more than a month. He knew that there must be many more necessitous cases than his, but, all the same, he was writing because he was down to his last shilling and he had lost everything he formerly cherished, including his self-respect. "Thank God!" the brief letter concluded, "my health remains excellent, in spite of many privations."

"That ought to stir the heart of any right-thinking philanthropist," he commented, after

he had read out the epistle—made sufficiently grimy to be realistic.

" My own opinion," remarked Elsie, " is that this particular philanthropist is anything but 'right-thinking,' but the touch at the end about your health ought to draw him."

" And now tell me all about your case," said the kindly-faced superintendent of the well-known charity organisation.

The well set-up young man in the much-worn tweed suit spoke earnestly for ten minutes. " And here are papers to prove it," he ended.

The superintendent examined the papers—the real history of which, it is safe to say, would have made him stare—with scrupulous care. In handing them back to the applicant, who said his name was " Arthur Gray," he asked a somewhat startling question : " Are you willing to go to Australia ? "

Peter Repington, in his character of a man without hope, eagerly replied : " I am willing to go anywhere providing I can get a decent living and something of my self-respect back."

The official smiled understandingly.

" I ask you," he went on, " because the philanthropist from whom I take my instructions is himself an Australian. He is a firm

believer in that country, and the form his financial help to such young men as yourself takes is to arrange for a situation for them in Australia, after paying their passage out and giving them £20 with which to make a start when they land. Of course, he provides also an outfit of clothes and linen."

" He must be a good sort."

" He *is* a good sort!" said the official emphatically; " his charity takes a practical form, and, therefore, is of the best kind."

" You work in co-operation with Mr——?"

The official smiled. " Our friend prefers not to have his name known. My duty is to sift the wheat from the chaff, the good grain from the tares. Of course, we have had hundreds, I might almost say thousands, of letters in reply to the advertisement. . . . But I am afraid I mustn't spare any more time to your particular case. You say you are willing to go to Australia? I have to ask that question, as I have already explained. Very well, here is a pound note to cover your immediate necessities; and now I shall want you to meet me at 9.30 to-morrow morning in the main booking-hall at Victoria Station."

" Where shall I have to go? " enquired the derelict.

"To a place called Wantage Felding, in Surrey. Do you know it?" The man to whom he was giving the information had made a slight start.

"No—I don't know it. I suffer from nerves a bit—that was what made me fidget."

"You are quite healthy?" asked the official.

"Yes—quite. Why?"

"I only ask you because Mr. Wayland—the philanthropist, I should have said—is very particular about that point. We all have our peculiarities, and he insists upon all those he helps being thoroughly fit men. I'm telling you this, Mr. Gray, because it may be that he will require you to undergo a strict medical examination when you arrive at Wantage Felding. His point is that Australia doesn't require weaklings—she wants fit men. As he provides the means to get there, it's reasonable enough, I think."

"Quite," agreed the other; "and, as I can truthfully say that I've scarcely had a day's illness in my life, I shan't walk in fear and trembling of the medical examination."

"You do not look as though you would," commented the official, smiling. "Well, until to-morrow, then." He held out a hand, which Arthur Gray shook.

"Here's a pound, a very pretty pound—what shall we do with this very pretty pound?" asked Peter Repington.

Elsie Summers and he were sitting at dinner in their favourite Soho restaurant. (It's very small, very select, very obscure, and the writer is resolved to refuse almost any bribe before he discloses its name.)

"What nonsense are you talking now, pray?" said Elsie Summers.

"Nonsense! Would you look a gift horse in the nose-bag, my girl? Hearken! This pound note was presented to me to-day by the personal representative of the philanthropist who advertised recently in the *Morning Age*."

"Did you follow that up?"

"After your illuminating remarks about spies, crooks, and all sorts of other horrific revelations, I felt compelled to do so."

"Do be serious," pleaded the girl.

"I intend to be," was the reply. Repington's good-looking face became grave. "This thing isn't panning out quite so well as I had hoped. On the surface it is apparently O.K. A man named Wayland, who lives in a remote Surrey hamlet called Wantage Felding, likes to spend his surplus cash in a practical fashion. He is an Australian, and, a firm believer in that country

and its future, he provides for every approved applicant for his bounty a situation there, a passage out, an outfit of new clothes, and a lump sum of £20 with which to land. The Christian Army has the task of interviewing the applicants in the first instance. I myself, in the character of Arthur Gray, was interviewed this morning. The official - in - charge — a very delightful chap, by the way—gave me this pound on account . . . of course, I shall send him it back, with something added to it for his coal-fund."

The girl took a sip of wine.

"And what about the applicants being healthy? Did the Christian Army official explain that?"

"Yes. He was a broad-minded cove. He said that we all had our peculiarities. Apparently Mr. Wayland's is a harmless one. Being a devoted lover of his native country, he intends to send only fit men to settle there. Anything to say?"

"It's certainly a very plausible reason. What do you intend to do? I'm afraid that Sir Herbert will not allow you to go so far away as Australia."

Repington coughed.

"I was hoping that you would express your

personal regret at my impending departure," he said, and was gratified to see a slight smile play round his companion's shapely lips. "No, I do not intend to go as far as Australia, but I think a day or so's stay in Surrey—preferably near the hamlet of Wantage Felding—might possibly be interesting. What do you say?"

"I am inclined to agree—but I shall take a revolver."

"Do. It's just as well to be on the safe side. All the same, if my friend of the Christian Army proves to be a crook, I shall give up this job and take to writing shockers."

At 9.30 the next morning an elegantly-attired young woman, who was accompanied by an immaculately-dressed young man, sauntered casually through the main booking-hall at Victoria Station. An official of the Christian Army, standing near two stalwart youths of the down-and-out class, appeared to be waiting for someone else to turn up.

"There he is," whispered Peter Repington; "we'll just hang around and see what happens."

At 9.35 the Christian Army official evidently grew tired of waiting. Going up to the booking-office, he put down some money and received two tickets in exchange.

"He's given me up, apparently," commented Repington.

"He evidently hasn't recognised you," the girl replied.

"I took considerable pains with my get-up yesterday, and was rather proud of it. Hello, they're off."

Following at a discreet distance, they watched the Christian Army official see the two men into the train. He handed them their tickets, and gave each a morning paper and what looked like a packet of cigarettes.

"A decent chap, that."

Elsie Summers nodded.

"Yes. I shall be surprised if he turns out wrong. By the way, did you think of asking him yesterday why the man at the other end—the mysterious Mr. Wayland—should take the trouble of advertising in the personal columns of the *Age*—a paper that is only read, generally speaking, by the moneyed and cultured classes?"

Repington threw away the cigarette he had been smoking.

"I forgot to tell you last night that his reply to that question was that the philanthropist, in accordance with his idea of giving his beloved Australia the best possible, was particularly

anxious to get recruits of a gentlemanly type—which accounts, of course, for the impression I made myself ! ”

“ The conceit of the man ! ” Elsie Summers said softly.

“ Well, you asked me a question, and I’ve replied to it,” was the unruffled answer ; “ and now I think we had better go back to the car and slip down to Wantage Felding ourselves.”

“ Stop, Peter ! ”

The command was so sharply spoken that Repington pulled up without question.

“ Why—what’s the matter ? ” he asked.

Elsie Summers pointed to a dark patch by the roadside.

“ That woman,” she said ; “ she is either desperately ill or——” Without waiting to complete the sentence, she opened the door of the two-seater.

The puzzled Repington watched her race across the wide country road, climb the bank on the other side, bend down, snatch something from the hand of a woman who was in a huddled-up position, and throw it away. Then he, too, left the car. Such conduct was singular, to say the least.

By the time he reached the couple, Elsie

Summers was endeavouring to soothe a woman who was thoroughly distraught.

"Tell me your trouble," she said; "this gentleman and I will do anything we can to help you."

By now, the significance of the situation had dawned on Peter Repington. This poor, storm-tossed soul had been about to take her life—the bottle Elsie Summers had thrown away had contained some crude poison, no doubt; salts of lemon or something like that.

"Yes, we will do anything we can to help you!" he said.

The woman looked up. She had evidently seen better days; her age was about fifty years; her clothes were of poor quality, but clean. Her face was livid, but there was a transparent honesty in the faded blue eyes.

"Oh, sir, it's kind of you, but what is there for me to live for now my boy's dead and gone?" The quavering voice broke on the last few words.

A glance passed between Peter Repington and his assistant. Both recalled the fact that they had reached the outskirts of a village called Wantage Felding, where there lived a mysterious philanthropist who took a particular interest in healthy young men.

"Look here, madam—" started Repington.

"Mrs. Cooper is my name," replied the woman, drying her eyes. "I've been a widow for the last thirteen years, and it seems cruel hard that my Jack, my only son, should have been taken from me. But I know he didn't go of his own free will. He was forced ; he would never have left his mother, after writing just a bit of a note."

Elsie Summers produced a spirit-flask by some magical means and held it to the woman's lips.

"This gentleman"—Elsie indicated Peter Repington as she spoke—"is connected with the police. If your son has disappeared, he will help you to find him. Won't you tell us all you know ? "

The brandy revived the grief-stricken mother. She regained self-control.

"I'll tell you what little there is," she said. "Jack has been out of work for some weeks, and a week ago he left home, saying——"

"Just a minute, Mrs. Cooper ; where is your home ? " asked Peter Repington.

"We live at Barking, sir. As I was saying, he was going to the local branch of the Christian Army to see if he could earn a shilling chopping wood. That is just a week ago to-day. I waited up for him until past twelve that night, but he never came back. And I haven't seen

him since ! ” A fresh flood of tears followed the statement.

“ You said something just now about having received a note from your son, Mrs. Cooper. Do you happen to have it with you ? ”

“ Yes, sir. But that note was never sent by my Jack, I feel sure of that. For one thing, he couldn’t use a typewriter.”

“ It was typed, then ? ”

“ Yes, sir.” She fumbled in a shabby bag. “ Here it is—oh, my dear boy ! ”

Repington smoothed out the creased piece of common writing-paper on which were carelessly typed the following words :

“ DEAR MOTHER,—I have the chance to get a good job on board a boat. I had to leave at once, so couldn’t come home. Don’t worry about me ; I shall be all right. Will send you some money directly I have any.

“ Your loving son,

“ JACK.”

“ Obviously a forgery,” muttered Repington, passing the letter to his assistant. Elsie Summers nodded.

“ Just one or two questions, Mrs. Cooper. Why did you come down here ? ”

"After receiving this letter—which I did in the afternoon following the day on which Jack left home—I went at once to the local branch of the Christian Army. I described my son, and asked if he had called there the day before. 'Yes,' the captain said. Then I went on to ask where Jack had gone, and the captain gave me an address——"

"An address near here? In Wantage Felding?" asked Repington eagerly.

"Yes, a Mr. Wayland," replied Mrs. Cooper.

Each taking an arm, they lifted her to her feet.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, as they led her towards the motor-car.

"To meet your son—we hope," was the reply.

During the short journey back to the village, Mrs. Cooper explained that she had called at the Wantage Felding address given her by the Christian Army captain at Barking, but had not been able to make anyone hear.

"The place looks deserted; all the blinds are down," she said. "It was after I came away that I suddenly had the feeling that my son had been killed—murdered! That was why I bought some salts of lemon, and——"

"You mustn't worry any more, Mrs. Cooper," Repington told her; "you must believe your son to be still alive until he is found—and I promise

I will do my best to find him for you. In the meantime, you must please stay as our guest at the hotel to which we are now going."

The poor woman whimpered.

"I don't know if I could do that, sir, thanking you all the same—but I'm sure it's very kind of you."

"Oh, but you must, Mrs. Cooper," insisted Elsie Summers. She put her arms round the woman and kissed her on the cheek.

After ringing the heavy bell at this gloomy-looking house which had on the pillars, at the beginning of the short drive, the name "The Gables," the elderly lady waited patiently. She held in her hand, as though it might have been a talisman, a white slip of paper.

For ten seconds or so everything remained silent. Not a sound came to her. Then—so cautiously that she was scarcely aware of the fact—the huge door opened slightly.

"What you want?" If she had not resolved beforehand to keep a firm grip on herself, this elderly lady, so respectably and even dignifiedly dressed, might have started, for the speaker, although dressed in conventional butler's garb, had a Chinaman's face. The slit almond eyes of the Oriental seemed to bore into her.

"Oh, you must excuse me . . . for a moment I was startled . . . you will excuse me, I feel sure. The fact is, I have called to look over the house —only if it is convenient, of course. Here is the 'Order to View' from the house-agent ; do you mind giving it to Mr.—Wayland is the name."

"Please wait!" The Chinese butler closed the door before departing.

Within a few minutes the man was back.

"My master, Mr. Wayland, will be pleased to show you over the house," he said.

"You are quite sure it is convenient?"

"Quite sure, madam."

The caller smiled up into the inscrutable yellow mask of a face.

"Do you mind my commenting on what good English you speak?"

"I have been many years in England . . . permit me to show you the way to my master, madam."

After traversing a large hall and a wide corridor, the Chinese butler paused before a door.

"May I enquire your name, madam?"

"Mrs. Calthorpe," was the reply.

Tapping on the door, the butler ushered the caller into a large, lofty room. A man who looked at first sight to have the body of a schoolboy rose from a chair.

"Mrs. Calthorpe, sir."

The man bowed.

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Calthorpe."

The latter decided at once that she wouldn't like him ; he seemed to be making mock of her.

"No, sir," said the police sergeant, "we have had no complaints about the house. It's true this here Mr. Wayland employs a Chinese butler, but, considering that he's supposed to have travelled a good deal in the East, I can't see myself that that's anything against him. Why, there was a gen'l'man by the name of Saltburn, what used to live up at the hall, who brought home from India, not only a full staff of black servants, but snakes as well. You remember the old saying, sir, 'There's no accountin' for tastes, as the old lady said when she kissed the cow.' As for this Chinaman——"

The caller at the Wantage Felding police station checked the flow of eloquence by producing a small metal object from his waist-coat. This he showed to the loquacious policeman.

"Do you recognise this, sergeant ? "

There was a note of respect, amounting almost to awe, in the other's voice as he replied :

" I've never seen the badge before, sir, but I've heard about it. You belong to the Home Secret Service, then, sir ? "

" I do," said the visitor brusquely, " and I want you to give me all the assistance that is in your power. I am more or less convinced that living in the house called ' The Gables ' is the most dangerous living criminal. You probably wouldn't know his name if I told you, but I have every reason to believe that he is the person responsible for the Surrey murders ! "

" What, sir ? " The listener was startled out of his lethargy. " Why, if I could capture that man, it would be the making of me ! "

" It would also be the ending of you, my friend, unless you watched your step every minute of the time. Now, I do not purpose to wait for a warrant ; I intend to break into this house just as soon as it's dark. How many men have you available ? "

" Two beside myself, sir."

" That will make four of us."

" He may have a bunch of crooks with him in the house, you think, sir ? "

" It's quite possible. Now listen, sergeant. I'm staying at the King's Head. I want you to be outside . . . "

" This," announced the guide, " is the second bedroom. You will observe . . . but how remiss of me ! "—with a sudden change of tone. " I haven't enquired yet how my young friend Repington is. Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me, Miss Summers ? "

In a flash, the hand of the elderly lady went to her sleeve. But in that instant the lithe form of the man who called himself Wayland flung itself forward ; before she could shoot, the revolver was knocked out of Elsie Summers's hand. In two steps Paul Vivanti was across the floor. He smiled as he picked up the weapon.

" So you wished to see my new home, young lady ? Well, so you shall ! " He smiled sardonically as he looked across at his caller.

" Permit me to congratulate you upon your disguise, Miss Summers ; I have no doubt it would have quite deceived the ordinary person. But with me it was different ; I possess an uncanny sixth sense of intuition. And now, may I ask why you have troubled to pay me this visit, and in such an elaborate make-up ? "

" There have been a couple of brutal murders in Surrey lately," Elsie Summers heard herself replying.

" So ! " He waited for just a second, and

then his whole being became possessed of a demoniacal rage.

"There will now be three!" he stated. "I have already promised you should see my house—and, once in, you shall not leave it!"

He sprang, animal-fashion, at his caller. In a swoon of sudden and irrepressible fear, the girl reeled backwards. The determination which had sustained her until now vanished; she knew death was near.

. . . She could feel her enemy's fingers clutching at her throat. Then came a terrific crash at the door, and a man hurtled into the room. Through a mist she saw this new-comer fling himself on Vivanti's back and hurl him fiercely to the ground.

And that was all she could remember before a merciful oblivion came.

Outside in the darkness, a group of men waited.

"That was a woman's scream!" said Peter Repington tensely. Repington's nerves were on edge; he had returned to his hotel to find Elsie Summers missing. It was like her to try to tackle this supremely dangerous job on her own. He guessed that, probably disguised, she had ventured alone into the den of the human

beast they were both tracking. "In you go," he now added to the men.

The back door gave way before the combined weight of four robust men.

"Elsie! Elsie!" the leader of the raiding-party called at the top of his voice.

It was a long time before they found the girl, and, when they did, it was to see a strange man in workman's clothes bending over her.

"Who are you?" demanded Peter Repington swinging the man round.

"My name is John Cooper," was the reply. "If you are the Mr. Repington that this lady has just been telling me about, I've got a lot to say to you."

"I have to find a man first," said Repington, and hastened away.

But once more he was disappointed; a close search of the house failed to disclose Paul Vivanti. Yet again the Worst Man in the World had disappeared, even while the hands of the Law were outstretched to grip him.

The story that John Cooper, the youth back from the dead, told that night at the King's Head was scarcely credible.

"When I went to the Christian Army headquarters at Barking that morning, I found a

man in a fur coat there," he said. " This man offered me a job if I would go away with him at once. I told him about my mother, and he said I could write to her when I got to the end of the journey. I was desperate, and so I consented.

" There was a motor-car outside, and I was told to get into it. You may not believe me," the speaker went on, " but I didn't remember anything else until I found myself in this house —kept a prisoner. There was a dreadful-looking old man—an invalid——"

" You needn't tell us any more, Cooper ; be thankful that we arrived when we did. But how did you manage to get free ? "

" I was kept in a cellar. To-night I pretended to be asleep when my supper was brought. The Chinaman, who was my jailer, entered unsuspecting. I sprang at him, knocked him out, and then rushed upstairs. Then I heard this lady scream——"

" Now go and talk to your mother ; she's in the next room," said Repington.

When the man had gone, Peter put his arms tenderly round the girl who had risked so much.

" This will be the last time I shall take you on an expedition," he said severely. " Why

didn't you wait for me? What have you to say for yourself?"

"Won't you let me have some supper before I tell you?" enquired Elsie Summers plaintively. "I caught a glimpse just now of a cold ham; it looked delicious."

Shrugging his shoulders, Repington rang the bell.

CHAPTER XI

THE SCARLET SIN

"IT'S so long since I had a holiday that I'm almost forgetting what the feeling's really like," said Peter Repington, politely smothering a yawn.

Elsie Summers, his very charming assistant, closed the file cabinet she had been examining.

"Work is good for a man," she stated gravely; "it keeps him out of mischief."

Repington almost forgot his manners.

"Well, I'm—jiggered!" he finished weakly. "I like your idea of 'work'! What with the Codrington forgery case, the Nevinson cypher affair, and the Lewisham suicide, I have scarcely had time to eat during the past month! But tonight I relax. I not only relax, but I frivol. I say," he continued, "I think you look really

ripping in that blue and gold thingummy you bought at Héloïse's. Do wear that to-night ! ”

The girl made a *moue* of surprise.

“ Am I to come with you ? I do not know that I can frivol ; I'm inclined to think I'm far too serious a person.”

“ Raise another single objection, and I'll kiss you where you stand—sit,” threatened the Secret Service free lance. “ To-night you and I are going to frivol. I have spoken ! Here”—picking up a letter from his littered desk—“ is an invitation to attend a ‘ crush ’ at Chelsea. It's been sent me by a dear old pal of mine, Jerry Hartsgill, who's by way of being a poet.”

“ Will it be Bohemian ? ” enquired Elsie Summers. “ I love Bohemian parties ! ”

Repington smiled.

“ Bohemian ? ” he repeated, grinning. “ Well, I shouldn't be at all surprised. Jerry is the sort of man who, if you asked him if he knew So-and-so, would in all probability reply : ‘ Know him ? Rather ! Fact is, I've got one of his socks on ! ’ ”

“ Oh, *do* let's go ! ” cried Elsie, clapping her hands.

“ You don't mind meeting long-haired men ? ”

“ No.”

“ Nor short-haired women ? ”

"Stupid! Every woman is short-haired nowadays."

"Oh, I don't mean shingled, bobbed, or the usual stuff. I mean clipped like a convict so that all the knobs show. . . . Then there may be some sandal-wearers, general freaks, and exhibitors of one-piece garments which look as though they had once been roller-blinds—the garments, I mean. Can you stand all that?"

"How absurd you are! I shall love it! It will be such a novelty meeting people who take themselves so seriously."

"As long as *you* don't take them seriously, any real danger may be avoided. On further and mature consideration, I think the blue and gold frock would be somewhat out of place—you couldn't get yourself up as a rather abandoned nut-eater, could you?"

"And what do *you* think of impersonating, pray?" she asked, after recovering from a fit of laughter.

Repington looked grave.

"I rather incline towards a homicidal portrait-painter. . . . But we will talk of this anon. At the moment, I believe, there are some letters to be answered."

"Thank you for the rebuke, kind sir, she

said,' " replied Elsie Summers. The next moment the room rang with the clatter of a typewriter being worked at terrific speed.

It was a curious scene. Elsie Summers had been prepared by her companion for surprises—but most of these people looked as though they had stepped out of a fantasy ; it was hardly possible to believe that they were real.

The old Bohemianism, which, in spite of its faults, was so lovable, is now dead. This commercial, rushing age has killed it. But there is an imitation which is bizarre whereas its forerunner was merely eccentric. This party which Jerry Hartsgill, poet and novelist, was giving at his rooms in Long Reach, Chelsea, had attracted many of the most advanced exponents of the cult. There were women in trousers and men in what appeared at first to be skirts. . . . Horrible !

Jerry Hartsgill, a mammoth of a man with precariously-fastened spectacles and a jolly round moon of a face, caught Peter Repington's arm.

" Hullo, old top ! So glad you could come."

" This is a very great friend of mine, Jerry—Miss Elsie Summers, Mr. Jerry Hartsgill."

" Delighted !" boomed the writer, shaking

hands. "My hat, what a crowd!"—looking round.

"Where did you pick 'em up? And what on earth are you doing in this galley at all?" questioned Repington. "The last I heard of you was from Jimmy Stevenson, 'one of us,' who told me that he found you camping out in the Northumberland moors, or some such place.¹ A far cry from this hectic town, old lad. Why the migration to the haunts of the wicked?"

"I got tired of being alone. I wanted to see my fellow-creatures."

"Well, you've collected a perfectly priceless collection here to-night. . . . Jerry, who's that reasonably rational chap talking to the remarkably pretty girl? And who—now I'm asking questions—is the cove with the confirmed absinthe-soaker's face, staring across? He looks as though he could stab both of them to the heart without the slightest compunction. Is this a human dram-er I see? Is that your base purpose, Gerald Hartsgill? Have you taken a flat in Chelsea for the perfectly foul purpose of studying your fellow-creatures, with a view to putting them into stories. Answer me!"

Hartsgill put a hand up to his precarious spectacles.

"There *is* a story there," he said, in a tone of

¹ *False-Face.*

surprising gravity. "Perhaps you'd care to hear it? I asked you to come to-night, Peter, old boy, because I wanted you to give that chap Duval—"

"An appropriately sinister name, if you refer to the absinthe-soaker," commented Repington. "But let's hear the story; Miss Summers, who is my assistant in the various little affairs of blood and fire which, for my sins, I am called upon to investigate, dotes on tales of passion."

"I shouldn't wonder—" started Hartsgill, and then, very aggravatingly, stopped.

"Let's go into the other room and find a quiet corner," he continued; "these asses can find plenty of entertainment talking about themselves."

When the quiet corner had been procured, and the cigarettes were lit, Jerry Hartsgill told his story.

"The decent-looking chap you saw talking to the pretty girl is an American," he started. "His name's Sherwin, and he has no need to paint for a living, because he's quite well off. But, from all accounts, he's a thundering good artist already, and is going to be an even better one later on.

"That's not the real cause of the trouble between him and Duval, however. I daresay

this may sound like something out of de Murger, but the pretty girl you saw talking to Sherwin is a model. Duval has been desperately keen on her ever since she came to Chelsea. Ivy Tyndale posed for him for a time, but then she refused to go to his studio again. Those who knew Duval guessed—and no doubt fairly correctly—at what had happened. Duval's reputation, so far as women are concerned, is something fierce.

"What was abundantly clear," continued Hartsgill, "was that, directly Ivy Tyndale met Gilbert Sherwin, they fell in love with each other. They would have been married, no doubt, only Ivy got to hear by some malicious chance of Sherwin having oodles of private money—and she refused him!"

"Refused him! Why?" asked Peter Repington.

"Do you mind if I have a guess at the answer, Mr. Hartsgill?" put in Elsie Summers. "Wasn't it because she was afraid Mr. Sherwin's people might think he had married beneath him?"

Hartsgill stared at her.

"Yes, that was just Ivy's reason, from what I can understand," he said; "but how on earth did you guess it?"

"I happen to be a woman myself," was the answer.

"Well," went on the narrator, after a pause, "there's an enmity between Duval and Sherwin now which, it seems, nothing can wipe out. Perhaps that's not the correct way to put it, though ; all the fire and brimstone is being breathed by Duval. He is always going to do something to Sherwin, but he never does it. As for the American, a quieter, nicer fellow never breathed. He looks upon Duval with a kind of quiet contempt. The only thing that could rouse him, I think, with regard to the other fellow, is if Duval attempted any more of his tricks with Ivy. Then I think Sherwin would kill him. In any case, something is bound to happen pretty soon, I imagine ; things can't go on as they have been going on for the past two months without an outbreak."

"Judging by the expression the man Duval has, I should think there's plenty of thunder about," commented Repington, while Elsie Summers sighed. "It all seems very terrible. Won't one of them go away ? "

Hartsgill shook his head.

"Sherwin says he prefers London to any other city in the world, and Duval won't stir while Ivy Tyndale is in Chelsea. . . . But I'm afraid I

have spoilt the evening for both of you. Sorry ! Come and drink."

A month after the visit to Jerry Hartsgill's Chelsea flat, Peter Repington entered the office wearing a flower. What was more, he sported a wonderful glossy silk hat, a new suit, the whitest of summer spats, and a general air of well-being. Elsie Summers looked at him in amazement.

" You must be thinking of getting married," she commented.

" I am," her employer replied.

" You will allow me to congratulate you, of course ? " she went on, her voice shaking a little.

" I will do nothing of the kind ! As a matter of fact, I have not yet obtained the consent of the —er—other party."

" Do I know her ? " asked Elsie Summers.

" You should do," replied Peter Repington. " I tell you what : I'm a bit backward at making love, kissing, and all that sort of thing. Would you, in your kindness, Miss Summers, allow me——"

" —to practise on me ? Certainly not ! " She rose to ward off any possible attack. But her face was flushed, and the olive-green silk jumper rose and fell.

"I didn't think you would, somehow," said Repington, sighing ; "but I now give you fair warning that, willy-nilly, by hook or by crook, Vivanti or no Vivanti, I shall marry you within three months ! I have stood all I can stand——" striking an heroic attitude.

"If you sit down you will be far more comfortable, I feel sure," was the comment ; "and now, since you have stated you are not going to be married to-day, will you please explain your festive appearance ? "

"Certainly ! We will chuck—I mean abandon —work for the day ; I intend to take you to the Academy ! "

"That's delightful !" said Elsie, springing up and softly clapping her hands. "I was hoping that something nice would happen to-day—and here it is ! It's the opening ; there will be bound to be a lot of interesting people there."

What Peter Repington personally found more interesting than the well-dressed Society crowd which thronged Burlington House, however, was the exceedingly good array of pictures. It had been voted a surprisingly good year for exhibits. Repington, although no critic in the real sense of the word, knew what he liked in art, and, in a small way, gratified this taste. His

flat at Albany contained some very good specimens of modern painting.

His attention was soon attracted to a large exhibit, round which a deeply-interested crowd had gathered. It proved to be the portrait of a girl wearing a cloak. A somewhat conventional study, and yet there were three factors which enchanted Peter Repington's attention immediately. These, in the order named, were (1) the extraordinarily vivid "tone" of scarlet paint used in the girl's cloak; (2) the fact that he recognised the girl; and (3) the very fine technique shown in the work.

He felt his arm nudged.

"Surely that girl is the model we met at Mr. Hartsgill's party?" said Elsie Summers.

"Yes—I was just recalling the fact to myself. And the artist is the man Duval."

The girl looked at him. It seemed to her that through the midst of this fashionable scene a grim spectre was stalking. Both recalled the words of Hartsgill: "There's an enmity between Duval and Sherwin which it seems nothing can wipe out." The fact that the "star" picture in the Academy was a study by the former of the girl who had caused this deadly enmity to spring up promised to add fuel to the flame. Had Ivy Tyndale thrown over Sherwin, the man she

loved, and gone back to Duval, whom Hartsgill had stated she hated ?

" The probability is," commented Elsie Summers, as though she were able to read her companion's thoughts, " that this painting was done before Miss Tyndale broke with Duval. What an extraordinarily vivid scarlet ! Have you ever seen anything like it before ? "

" Never ! " declared Repington. Turning, he caught the arm of a passing man with a short cry : " I say, Lorimer, what is the secret of this ? " He pointed to the picture, " The Girl in Scarlet."

Charles Lorimer, the art critic of the *Daily Meteor*, and certainly the best man at his job in London, smiled at his questioner.

" Why," he said, " it means that Duval, the artist, has discovered an entirely new medium in which to express himself. Sensational as the statement may appear, it is generally recognised that Duval has mixed a paint which is not only unique, but which is a brand new find ! It is wonderful, but it is also true. In the whole history of art," the speaker concluded, pointing to the picture which by this time was besieged with eager spectators, " no scarlet tint of that exceptionally vivid tone has ever

before been used on canvas." With an apology for having to rush away, Lorimer was gone.

Lorimer was not the only prominent art critic who proclaimed that Duval, in his Academy picture, had discovered an entirely new paint, and the subject soon became the topic of the hour. The "find" was admittedly a sensation, and the news was cabled to the ends of the earth. Naturally everyone wished to share the artist's secret, but, beyond admitting that the scarlet paint he had used *was* an invention, and that he alone among living artists knew its component parts, the "lion" of the hour refused all further details. "Why should I tell the world a secret which may be worth an untold fortune?" he said to the newspaper interviewers. This business acumen was generally conceded to be quite reasonable. Undoubtedly Duval would be a fool to broadcast his discovery.

Peter Repington was in a very thoughtful mood for the next few days after visiting the Academy. Pressed on the point by Elsie Summers, he made a somewhat stupid and rambling statement to the effect that "scarlet was the colour of sin . . . and that he hadn't

liked Duval's face from the beginning." It was anything but a satisfactory reply, but the girl did not say anything further then.

On the third day after his visit to the Academy, the Secret Service man met Jerry Hartsgill. The latter's round, bespectacled face was twitching with excitement.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked. "No, of course you haven't"—slapping himself in rebuke. "Huggenheimer, the American millionaire art collector, has cabled Duval an offer of £10,000 for his 'Girl in Scarlet.' Duval naturally has accepted it, and is giving a wonderful supper at the Café Blue Moon to celebrate his success. The astonishing thing is—he's invited Sherwin!"

"Success often changes a man's whole nature," commented Repington. "Has Sherwin accepted?"

"Yes. It really looks as though the whole miserable squabble between the two is going to be healed. Of course, Sherwin, one of the whitest men and finest sportsmen living to-day, is as pleased as Punch about Duval's wonderful triumph. As a matter of fact, I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't Sherwin who told Huggenheimer about the picture. By the way, would you care to come to the supper?"

"I'm not an artist, my dear, darling fat-head ! Besides, I'm a perfect stranger to Duval ; and perfect strangers cannot expect to partake of a man's hospitality—even if the said man has just received a cheque for £10,000."

"Rot ! Duval will be only too pleased when I explain that you are a pal of mine. Say you'll come ; it ought to be quite a wonderful night."

"I have no doubt it will be," was the reply, "but I won't intrude, Jerry. I tell you what I think will be the best arrangement," he went on. "I will take Miss Summers to dine at the Café Blue Moon on that particular night—she has rather a leaning towards these exotic places every now and then—and, when the real fun of the evening commences, you can slip out if you like and take us in. How will that do ? "

"All right—if you must be stand-offish ! "

In spite of the dislike which many men and women in that room had for the man, the great crowd, met that night at the famous Bohemian restaurant at the invitation of the most discussed artist of the day, burst into spontaneous cheers when Oscar Duval rose to his feet. Art is above personal feeling, and it was generally agreed that the man deserved his success, tremendous as it had proved. Besides, Duval

was an entirely different person in character from what he had been before that epoch-making work of his "The Girl in Scarlet" was hung. Even the Devil should be given his due.

The dark, saturnine, dissipated face of Oscar Duval seemed to gleam as he stood looking round at the men and women who had just paid him memorable homage.

"My dear friends," he said, in a voice which filled at least one listener with a strong sense of disgust, "I am overwhelmed at the warmth of your greeting. Believe me, this is the proudest moment of my life; to stand here, acclaimed by you who have known me for so long, you who have watched my struggles, is worth far more to me than any material success which I may have gained."

Cheers greeted this sentiment, and the speaker went on: "My one regret to-night is that our old friend Gilbert Sherwin is not with us. I say 'old friend' because although, as you know, Sherwin and I have had our disagreements in the past, I hope in the future that that unfortunate episode will be entirely forgotten. To prove myself in earnest over this, I propose to make to Sherwin to-night a small present. Can any of you guess what form I intend that present to take, my friends?"

There was no answer.

"I intend to give Gilbert Sherwin a tube of my new paint—and Ivy Tyndale shall be the one to make the presentation!" cried the speaker.

For a second there was a tense silence. Then someone started to cheer, and the rest of the gathering followed with such resounding vivacity that it seemed as though the domed roof would be lifted off. What a magnificent, dramatic *dénouement*! To give to his old enemy a tube of the very paint which had made him world-famous, and to send the gift through the agency of the girl whose beauty, in the past, had been a drawn sword between them! . . .

"We will go now," cried Duval, before the cheers had died away. "As you know, our comrade Sherwin is in bed suffering from a fractured ankle. What bad luck that he could not have been with us to-night! But we will give him a call. Who wants to come?"

The whole assemblage shouted as with one voice.

"Oh, do let us go!" said Elsie Summers.

To her surprise, Peter Repington was confused and abrupt in his manner.

"You go with Hartsgill; I have arranged

for him to take you. I will call there later." With that, he turned away.

Elsie Summers bit her lip.

"I'll never forgive him—never!" she told herself.

While the man in bed was fondling the tube of paint which Ivy Tyndale had just given him a wild-eyed figure burst into the room. It was Peter Repington.

He caught Jerry Hartsgill's arm.

"Clear all of these people out of the room," he said, in a tone which startled the other. "Quick, man—get them away somehow or other—it's a matter of life or death!" Without a word of explanation, he crossed to the bed and snatched the tube of paint from Gilbert Sherwin's hand. "I'll tell you why in a minute," he said to the dumbfounded American.

Gradually the room was cleared.

"I believe this tube of paint to contain a deadly poison," the Secret Service free lance stated, without any preamble; "that is why I was rude enough to snatch it from you just now," he went on, addressing Sherwin. "With your permission, I propose to hand it over to an expert for chemical analysis. The paint

will not be spoilt for your purpose—if it is harmless."

"I should explain that my friend is connected with the British Secret Service," vouchsafed Jerry Hartsgill, "and he would not say a thing like this unless he had some very good grounds."

"Very well," replied Sherwin, "but I wouldn't like a word of this to get about, of course."

"Not a word will," answered Peter Repington; "what is more, if I am proved wrong, I will make a personal apology to Duval."

After they had left the room and were alone, Peter Repington turned to his company of two.

"What started me thinking was the yarn that Duval had got into the habit of wearing rubber gloves when painting. He explained at the time, you will remember, that he was able by this means to get an added delicacy of touch. No one seriously credited this, and it was thought to be a pose. But, as I say, the thing set me thinking.

"Item No. 2 was seeing Dr. Paul Vivanti at the celebration supper given by Duval."

"Vivanti!" echoed Elsie Summers, in an incredulous tone.

"Yes. It was only a glimpse, but I felt sure it was he at the back of the room. He must have caught sight of me, for when I had pushed through the crowd he was gone. Vivanti, I remembered, was an exceedingly gifted chemist—and *an authority on subtle poisons*, amongst other things !

"Item 3 was the knowledge that human nature does not change. I know I said it did to you, Jerry, but that was merely camouflage. Even more satisfying to Oscar Duval than his world-wide fame was the thought that in the new paint, which he himself only used when wearing rubber gloves, he had a sure and certain means of murdering the man he still hated."

"But how——?" asked Hartsgill.

"The Government expert who examined that paint said that if it got into the smallest abrasion on the skin, or even into a 'back friend,' it would mean death. You know how the hands of the average artist are daubed with paint from his palette."

"Good God ! it's horrible to think of ! What will happen to that devil Duval ? "

"I have caused a warrant to be issued for his arrest ; but it's not Duval I want," replied Repington slowly ; "it's the man who mixed that hellish paint, and saturated it with a

hitherto unknown deadly poison, that I'm after——”

“ Paul Vivanti,” supplied Elsie Summers, with an intake of her breath.

CHAPTER XII

THE MIND OF THE SLAYER

THE telephone bell in the room used by the photographers on the staff of the *Daily Miracle* newspaper rang.

“ Methuen there ? ”

It was Arthur Methuen himself who answered the call. He recognised the voice of the picture editor.

“ Yes—speaking.”

“ Come along ; I have a job for you.”

His Press camera slung over his shoulder, the photographer—perhaps the most intrepid specimen of his intrepid race in Fleet Street—went along the corridor to receive his orders. He found Halliday, the picture editor, in a state bordering on mania. But, then, Halliday was always like that when a good print was in prospect.

“ Word's just come through from Money at Scotland Yard,” he exclaimed, “ that a warrant

has been issued for the arrest of a foreign Count—Italian blighter called Nitti or some such damn-fool name—for fraud. This Nitti is due to marry Lady Wellington at St. George's Church, Hanover Square, in half an hour. Slip up and get some good 'shots': 'Arrested at Altar Steps'—that kind of thing."

To Methuen, who had once descended Vesuvius, a job of this description was mere child's play. He nodded and departed.

Not many minutes later he stepped out of a taxi-cab at Hanover Square. Looking across at the church, where so many famous matrimonial alliances have been celebrated, he was surprised to find no sign of activity. Had Money, or Halliday, made a mistake?

Between the London police force and the Metropolitan pressmen there is usually a good understanding. Officially, the police are supposed to keep what information they may possess on criminal subjects to themselves, but actually, if approached in the right way, they are not infrequently inclined to be communicative. When this particular constable saw Methuen's camera, he was good enough to inform the photographer that the arrest of Count Nitti had actually taken place half an hour before, on the steps of the famous church.

Methuen softly cursed. He had missed a thundering good picture through being misinformed. Money, the *Miracle* reporter attached to police headquarters, would be on the carpet for that.

Thanking the policeman, Methuen turned away. He had dismissed his taxi, and now decided to walk back to the office, in the hope of snapping a decent street subject.

He had gone barely a dozen yards when he felt his arm touched.

"Please excuse me," said a voice, "but are you a Press photographer?"

"Yes," he replied, before taking much notice of the man who had accosted him. He quickly decided, however, that the other was one of the most peculiar-looking individuals he had ever seen. The man had the frame of a schoolboy but the head of a giant. Huge, slumbrous eyes were set in a waxen face, the dull, white skin of which showed up in strikingly vivid contrast to the small black moustache and the very red lips.

Before Methuen could make any other reply, this strange-looking person had gone on: "I suppose you are here trying to get photographs of Count Nitti—my unfortunate countryman who had the misfortune to be arrested on the

steps of St. George's Church not half an hour ago?"

"Yes," replied the photographer. Overcoming his strong personal sense of dislike to this extraordinary man, he added: "Did you know Count Nitti?"

The stranger nodded his huge head.

"I have known him intimately for many years. If you have time to come to my flat—I live quite near—I shall be pleased to tell you the story of his amazing career."

Here was a wonderful piece of luck, an opportunity which was too good to be missed. Although a photographer on the *Miracle* was principally concerned with obtaining pictures, yet, of course, he was required to bring in a news-story if the occasion offered.

"Have you a photograph of your friend Count Nitti, sir?" enquired Methuen.

"I have a recent one," was the reply.

After that, Methuen saw it as his plain duty to accompany the man to his flat.

There he was made very welcome with a whisky and soda and cigarettes, while his host started to tell a life-story which made the Press photographer prick up his ears. The extraordinary career of Count Antonio Nitti, as narrated by this man, who had stated that his

name was Paul Salvini, sounded more like fiction than fact.

After about five minutes' note-taking, he ventured to make that comment.

"You would suggest that I am lying?" demanded his host, springing up.

"Lying! No. Who suggested lying?" parried the pressman.

As Methuen looked at the man, he felt an extraordinary change come over him. It was amazing—and terrifying. It was as though he was being robbed of his will—as though all his moral and physical strength was passing from his body into the frame of this—this evil monster who was now standing over him.

"Look here—" he started to gasp. Then he tried to rise from his chair, but was unable to do so. He remained fixed—and helpless.

"You will keep quiet—and do exactly what I wish you to do," was the terrifying command he heard proceed from the other man's lips.

"I'm ever so sorry I can't take you out to-night," said Peter Repington.

Elsie Summers smiled.

"I hope you enjoy yourself," she replied sportingly.

The Secret Service free lance had called at his

assistant's flat on his way to an emergency dinner at the Crimes Club. In doing so, he had been forced to cancel a half-promise he had made to Elsie Summers. Not to attend a Crimes Club dinner was an heinous offence—not only to the small but distinguished company who comprised the membership, but also to oneself. After dinner a world-famous expert on his particular subject gave his views on a particular branch of criminology. Each address was invariably a masterpiece.

On this particular night a very celebrated alienist spoke of the wonders of the unconscious mind. After stating that he had recently been consulted by a certain famous K.C. on the question of whether he could plead, with any hope of success, that a man he was defending on a serious charge had actually committed the crime whilst in a fit of complete absence of mind, the speaker proceeded :

“ I have no doubt whatever that many an innocent person has got into trouble—although not such serious trouble, of course, as this —by the performance of something quite unrealised at the time. Most of us can recall some instance of the kind, and how surprised we were later.

“ We are fully conscious only of those things

on which our minds are actually set at the moment, though subconsciously we are more or less aware of many things. In driving a golf ball our attention is fixed on it, but we are also, in a lesser way, aware of the presence of our partner, the green, the sun, wind, etc.

" There is a realm of the brain always busy recording and storing impressions, even when we are not fully aware of them. The subconscious mind, which functions always, even in sleep, and which acts in thought, dreams, and in other phases of cerebration, is stored with memories, desires, regrets, mostly repressed or latent; and these react on our views and actions.

" Many of the acts are, in a way, voluntary, but carried out by the body mechanically—as walking, where we may go on almost without knowing we are doing it, as our men got into the way of doing when on a night march, and half asleep, during the war.

" Some men can write automatically, the pen running on while the mind is elsewhere. Much of the so-called spirit or psychic writing is of this type, just as much of the spirit revelation of séances is derived from the subconscious element—the buried store of latent memory, impression, and the lumber of old dreams.

Sleep-walking is an example of automatic action, as also is that performed under hypnotic and mesmeric influence.

"Is it any wonder, with our strangely complex brains, that we sometimes do things without knowing it?"

The speaker paused, and a man rose.

"Doctor, if it is quite convenient to you," he said, "will you please elaborate your theory about a crime being committed whilst the person is in a state of either mesmerism or hypnotism? Is it possible, for instance, for one person to influence another person's mind to such an extent that that second person may be induced to commit—say, murder—without being in the least degree conscious of the fact?"

"Certainly," was the firm reply. "I am afraid I cannot quote you a true example from this country, although there was a recent case in Germany in which it was fairly conclusively proved that the girl who committed a series of particularly atrocious murders acted under the malign influence of her stepfather. And I will tell you what is also possible," went on the speaker.

"We will suppose that a man who ardently wished another man—an enemy—to die, had such hypnotic influence over a third man that he

induced this third man to attempt to kill his enemy whilst the latter was asleep. You follow me so far?

"We will suppose," continued the speaker, after the deeply-interested audience had murmured "Yes," "that the man who is to be killed has someone to whom he is particularly attached, and who is very fond of him in return—the girl he hopes to marry, for instance. Now, it is quite possible that this girl, knowing that some danger threatens the man she loves, if she is at all psychic, may be in a position to warn her lover of the approaching threat to his life. I have actually known one such case in my own practice."

Among the members who crowded forward at the end of the address to congratulate the lecturer was a man whom Peter Repington knew as the editor of the *Daily Miracle*.

"I shall have to call you in, I am afraid, Repington," he said in a semi-jocular tone; "one of my Press photographers went out on a job this morning and hasn't come back. If he keeps up this disappearance business, I'll give you a ring."

"Do," replied the Secret Service investigator; "the task of tracking down a missing Press photographer is strangely appealing."

Strolling with his uncle, Sir Herbert Mandeville, up Park Lane, afterwards, he discussed this theory of the lecturer that night. "It opens up rather uncanny possibilities, sir," he said.

"Yes," replied the chief of the Secret Service Department for which he worked, "but Vassall is a splendid man—very sound, even if his views may seem a trifle startling at times. You can rely upon him, Peter."

"H'm! Well, in that case, it seems to me that either you or I might expect a call from Dr. Paul Vivanti one of these nights. It's over two months now since he last showed his cloven hoof, and I'm beginning to get quite anxious as to what has become of him."

"I don't think you need worry on that account, my boy. Vivanti is merely resting for the time being; but you can rest assured that we shall be hearing from him again before very long."

Repington saw his uncle safely home to Brook Street, and then hailed a taxi. He felt he wanted a mild frivol after his somewhat serious evening. He danced at the New Cabaret Club until one o'clock, and then, like a respectable citizen, proceeded home to the Albany—the "Piccadilly Paradise," as it has been described.

Two hours later, he sat up in bed. The ringing of the telephone had awakened him from a sound sleep.

Yawning, he stretched out his hand for the instrument.

"Yes?" he asked; and then a voice, the sound of which sent a thrill through his body, came to him over the wire.

"Peter," he heard Elsie Summers say, "you are in great danger. Take care of yourself, dear!"

"Why did you ring me up, darling?" he asked.

"I awoke a minute ago with a presentiment—I had such a horrible dream; it was so real that I had to speak to you. Peter, don't think me silly—"

A slight noise on the other side of the room made Repington turn his head. His bedroom door was slowly opening.

Quietly, he whispered into the 'phone: "Go to sleep now, dear; I am perfectly all right." And then, replacing the receiver, he quietly got out of bed. Who was this joker creeping uninvited into his bedroom at three o'clock in the morning?

The door was sufficiently wide open now to admit a body, and a man, who was a complete

stranger to Repington—watching, crouched, from the other side of the bed—entered. He had a revolver in his right hand.

"A sleep-walker," Repington told himself, after one glance at the intruder; and then, noticing the stain on the hand which carried the revolver, he added: "A photographer, probably. Now—what?"

The question was soon answered. After taking one look at the empty bed, the strange visitor fired straight at the crouching Secret Service free lance. Repington felt a red-hot sear pass along the top of his head, and then, wriggling beneath the bed, he dived straight at the man's legs and brought him down with a resounding crash. The next minute Dommett, Repington's manservant, was in the room, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"Help me with this rascal, Dommett," was the command, which aroused him into a full sense of activity.

Repington needn't have bothered; as it happened, he proved more than a match for his mysterious would-be murderer. The man literally crumpled in his arms. His manner while the Secret Service agent handcuffed him was like that of a person bereft of sense. Finally, when he was thrown on to the bed,

he started up stupidly, for all the world as though he had just been awakened from a very deep sleep, stared at his captor, and said in a shaking voice : " Where am I ? What have I done ? You devil, what are you doing to me now ? "

Repington regarded the man fixedly. Then he spoke to his servant.

" Find out Dr. Gilbert Vassall's number in the telephone book," he said. While the man thumbed the thick pages, he turned his attention to his prisoner again.

" My name is Repington," he said, slowly and distinctly ; " I live here in the Albany. Ten minutes ago you came into this bedroom. You had a revolver in your hand. You shot at me with this revolver with the intention, it was obvious, of killing me——"

" No ! No ! I don't know anything about it ! Why should I want to kill you ? You are lying ! I don't know you—I've never met you. . . . Oh, what in God's name has happened to me ? "

" Dr. Vassall on the 'phone, sir," announced Dommett.

Repington picked up the receiver, to hear a stream of strong language.

" Yes, I quite understand, doctor," he said ;

"but I promise you sufficient reward if you pop round to the Albany straight away. It concerns what you were talking about at the Crimes Club to-night."

Twenty minutes later, Gilbert Vassall, Doctor in Mental Healing, entered the room.

"What——" he started, when Repington drew him on one side, telling him briefly what had happened, and giving him his own view of the affair. "I must say I shouldn't have got the notion into my head if I hadn't heard your theory about hypnotism to-night," he added.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Vassall.

"Test my view and see if it's correct," was the reply.

The doctor of psychology approached the prisoner.

"I want you to understand that no harm is intended you," he said; "there is some deep mystery attached to you being here, and I think and hope that I can unravel this to the satisfaction of everyone if you will answer the questions I intend to put to you. Will you do that?"

"Of course. I have already said that I do not remember the least thing about this——"

" You will. Now, I want you to yield yourself to me. I intend to send you off to sleep, but you needn't be afraid ; I have already promised that no harm shall come to you."

The man with the stained hands sprang up.

" I can't—that devil did that—hypnotised me—"

Vassall made one or two passes with his hands.

" That other man—whoever he was—sent you to sleep to commit murder. I send you to sleep in order to try to clear you of the suspicion of a horrible crime. We are your friends and not your enemies. This gentleman"—indicating Peter Repington—" is a member of the Secret Service, while I am a doctor of psychology."

" Do what you like with me," was the weary answer.

" Please sit in this chair," Vassall now ordered ; and, when the man was leaning back, he sat opposite and looked straight into the other's eyes. Repington, watching, noticed the man soon sink into what seemed a deep sleep.

Then the following interrogation took place.

" Tell me your name ? "

"Methuen—Arthur Methuen."

"Your profession?"

"I am a Press photographer on the staff of the *Daily Miracle*."

Repington gave a start. He remembered the words of the editor of that famous, if sensational, newspaper at the Crimes Club that night. Here was the missing Press photographer!

"What happened before you came here?"

Unhesitatingly came the answer:

"I was sent to Hanover Square this morning on a job. An Italian Count called Nitti had been arrested on the steps of St. George's Church just as he was about to be married. I arrived too late to get a picture. Then a man—" The man under the hypnotic influence gasped.

"Tell me about this man—everything about him. Describe him first."

The terror in the Press photographer's voice calmed.

"He is a man with a very small body—the body of a schoolboy—but an enormous head. He has huge eyes, a waxen kind of face, with a small black moustache, and abnormally red lips—"

Peter Repington passed what he had scribbled

on a piece of paper to Vassall. The latter read it, and nodded.

"Did this man tell you his name?" he asked his subject.

"Yes—Paul Salvini."

Vassall looked across at the Secret Service free lance, who smiled.

"What did Paul Salvini say to you?"

"He came up to me in Hanover Square, just after I had finished talking to a policeman. After asking me if I were a Press photographer, he said that if I returned to his flat—which was quite near—he would tell me the full details of Count Nitti's sensational career. He also had a recent photograph."

Again Peter Repington scribbled on a piece of paper, and again Vassall, after reading, nodded.

"What was the address of the flat to which you went?" he asked.

"305A Hanover Square—the ground-floor premises were occupied by a tailor."

Repington started to dress. Slipping a revolver into his pocket, he said to Vassall: "You carry on. That fellow Salvini—real name Vivanti—is the biggest crook of the generation. I'm going to get him. Shall be back as soon as possible."

This time Dr. Gilbert Vassall did not nod. After looking at the speaker closely, he gave the advice : "Don't go alone."

At dawn Peter Repington returned to the flat. He was a thoroughly disgusted man. His temper was improved, however, by seeing Elsie Summers drinking a cup of tea in his sitting-room. With her was Dr. Gilbert Vassall.

The latter looked up.

"Any luck?" he asked.

The Secret Service man shook his head.

"The bird had flown. Like the good strategist he has always proved himself, he didn't leave anything to chance. I picked up a couple of men on the way, and we searched the house from cellars to attics. That was on the off-chance—the caretaker had already told us that 'Mr. Salvini' had left for the Continent early in the evening. Of course, he was at the back of this affair to-night?"

"Yes; there can be no doubt that he hypnotised that poor devil Methuen—whom I have allowed to go home, by the way—and forced on his will the post-hypnotic suggestion that he should come to your bedroom and shoot you with a revolver. It sounds fantastic, but it is unmistakably true."

"But how did he get in?" asked Elsie Summers.

"Vivanti supplied him with keys. Here they are."

Repington studied them intently.

"Wax impressions," he concluded. "Dommett, my man, is entirely above suspicion. I shall have to enquire what piano-tuners and other gentry of that type have been hanging about here. An ingenious scheme," he added, looking at Vassall.

"Very," confirmed the other; "and, although it caused you considerable distress, it is very satisfactory from my point of view to have a theory so splendidly substantiated. You owe it entirely to Miss Summers that you are still alive—didn't she give you a warning over the telephone?"

"She did," replied Repington.

There was so much warmth in his voice that Vassall suddenly remembered he had a home of his own. He rose to go, bending low over Elsie Summers's outstretched hand.

"Some fellows get all the luck," he said enigmatically, as Peter Repington wished him good-bye after thanking him for his wonderful assistance.

Coming back to the room, he held out his

arms. Like a tired child seeking sleep, Elsie Summers crept into them.

"The time has come, sweetheart," Repington said in a voice that shook; "I cannot wait any longer. You would not have me wait any longer?"

She snuggled closer into her anchorage for a reply.

"I am tired of work, tired of London," Repington told her; "I want to see the deep blue of the Mediterranean; I want to wander the whole Riviera through, from Hyères to Monaco; I want to see the mimosa in full bloom, and the flowering shrubs; I want to sit out on a balcony having breakfast—with you, darling girl!"

"Peter!" she sighed.

He bent and kissed her lips.

"I have a licence—"

"Peter!"—again.

"Yes, I have had it ready and waiting ever since that day when I warned you that within three months we would be married. We will lunch first at the Savoy! What do you say?"

"My dear," was the reply, with the whimsical little smile which Peter Repington knew—and loved—so well, "I am so pleased at having

you still alive that I suppose I must agree to marry you. . . . Kiss me, Peter! Such as I am . . . ”

“ You are the most wonderful girl that ever lived ! ” he declared. “ Now run home and dress. I will make what arrangements are necessary. Can you be at the Covent Garden register office at twelve o’clock ? ”

“ If nothing crops up in the meantime,” she gently mocked.

The luncheon at the Savoy was an enormous success. News of the marriage had quickly spread, and many of the most famous men in the life of London made it convenient to drop in and wish the happy groom and the radiant bride long life and good fortune.

Presently came Dommett, Peter Repington’s manservant.

“ This letter came by the eleven o’clock post, sir,” he said ; “ as it was registered, I thought it might be important.”

“ Thank you, Dommett. You have seen to the train and the luggage ? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ That’s all that matters, then.” He slipped the unopened letter into his pocket.

It was over fifty hours later that he pulled it out, and wondered what it was. By this time they had reached the Riviera balcony for which he had longed when in London.

"That letter, Peter," said Elsie; "why don't you open it? Is it from one of your other 'loves,' and you don't wish to make me jealous?"

He laughed like the happiest man in the world—which, indeed, he was.

"One wife at a time, if you please," he rebuked. "I'm not a Mormon."

Then he slit the registered envelope.

"**M**Y YOUNG FRIENDS,—I have just received the information that my last little venture has proved not entirely successful. This is rather discouraging, and has convinced me that I require a rest. Why not follow my example? Then you could allow a plan which has long been in your minds to mature —you could get married. For the space of six calendar months I promise not to disturb your happiness.

"But after that we are bound to meet again. Until we do, my salutations.

"PAUL VIVANTI."

Elsie Summers shivered as she handed back the letter to her husband.

Peter caught her in his arms.

"Never mind Vivanti," he said; "concentrate on me."

She sighed with pure happiness.

"How stupid you were, Peter, not to have carried me off before!" she said.

THE END

